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Samurai Wisdom Stories

TALES FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF BUSHIDO

Pascal Fauliot

Translated by Sherab Chödzin Kohn

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HB

To Jacques Normand,
My master of budo,
Shihan of kyudo and naginata-jutsu,
Pioneer of the traditional martial arts in Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE of being able to practice with Jacques Normand Sensei from the time I was a teenager. He was one of the first Europeans to live in Japan and study the martial arts in an intensive manner there. In 1969, he took up residence in Shizuoka. Being a very passionate and tough individual, he trained nearly forty hours a week in various disciplines. After many years he returned to France having mastered the fighting arts for most of the samurai weapons—the sword, bow, *naginata* (halberd), *yari* (lance), the different kinds of staff, *kusarigama* (sickle and chain)—as well as the techniques of barehanded fighting, including karate and aikido, and the ancient sword dances (*kenbu*). This made him one of the few people in the world to have mastered almost as many martial arts as the samurai of olden times. He is also one of the first Westerners to have been accepted into the *koryu*, the ancient schools of the Japanese martial arts. In this way he became qualified to receive *menkyo kaiden* (transmission of secret knowledge) and to obtain the prestigious title of *shihan*, which proclaims a practitioner to be a master of the budo tradition.

It was Jacques Normand Sensei who made it possible for me to work closely with Tokuda Masahiko Sensei, a *soke*, a grand master, the twenty-first head and holder of the transmission lineage of the Heki Ryu Insai Ha, whose origins go back to the fifteenth century. He is an exceptional teacher whose profound understanding of *kyujutsu* (the art of the bow) and whose erudition are equaled only by his simplicity and compassion. A master of this level is the very incarnation of the spirit of budo, the spiritual Way of the traditional martial arts. This Way is fully steeped in both Shintoism and Buddhism. It is true *ritsu zen*, which literally means “standing meditation,” but in reality is more like meditation in motion. This Way is also followed in the other arts practiced by the monks and *bushi*, such as calligraphy, painting, tea ceremony, and others.

Ken zen ichinyo, says the adage, “The sword and Zen are one.” *Butsudo*

(the Way of the Buddha) and budo were closely intertwined in the glory days of the samurai. This was so much the case that it was typical for warriors of all ranks to take the minor monastic vows of Buddhism but continue their work in this floating world as practicing Buddhist laymen, the equivalent of lay Christian brothers, before finally retiring to a monastery or hermitage. Thus the illustrious lords Takeda Shingen and Uesugi Kenshin are often depicted with their heads shaven or wearing a religious cap, with a monk's bag over the shoulder, and holding a rosary in one hand and a sword or fan of command in the other.

Personally, I have always been very taken by the beauty of movements that manifest the inner state of the practitioner. A movement has a sound, and a kata (a codified series of movements) is like a melody in the way it is composed, in its rhythm, and in the way it is interpreted. Every manifestation is a reflection of *kokoro*, of the soul of the person who is manifesting. In *kyudo*, the Way of the Bow, the master does not even need to watch the archer who is shooting. He hears the "song of the bow," and that is enough to let him perceive the quality of the shot. The sound of the string causing the bamboo to vibrate, the whistling of the arrow, its impact on the target—all these factors speak. Meditation in movement is the goal. An awakened mind enables the practitioner to enter into the resonance of the cosmic Awareness. The great Zen master Hakuin said that "meditation in the midst of action is a thousand times superior to motionless contemplation."

The practitioner of this art must submit to his training with respect, discipline, and humility. He must subject himself to a veritable ascesis: the unrelenting repetition of a movement in the work of polishing it and at the same time perfecting oneself—all under the strict eye of one's master. Jacques Normand has always stressed the importance of the body in action:

> Movements that are executed correctly allow the body to relax, to flourish. The first phase is corrective: the spine straightens up, the shoulders sink down, tensions fall away, and the breath recovers its natural rhythm. Once this work of restoration is complete, the person is at the point where he or she can develop harmoniously. Genuine meditation in movement, dynamic yoga, the art of the gesture, brings about an intimate connection between body and mind that results in the progressive opening of the chakras, the subtle centers of the body. The art of physical movement has the effect of recharging one's energy. The goal one pursues here is to fill

oneself within with magnetic potentiality that is as balanced as it can possibly be.

This process of self-perfection is in reality a process of stripping away. This is because the aim of it is to reach satori, Awakening—to realize *kensho*, the vision of one's true nature. No doubt it is a quest for inner liberation, but for the purpose of serving something greater than oneself. Etymologically, the samurai is "one who serves," a servant—in the sense of a servant of the state or the servant of a temple. The samurai is the peacemaker who reestablishes and maintains the balance of a feudal domain—or of the world. In Japanese mythology, the gods themselves utilize the noble weapons of the bushi—the bow, the sword, the naginata—to fight the demons, to restore the primordial harmony, to pacify the earth. These are the same weapons that are used by masters of the martial arts in purification rituals, exorcisms, and rites of healing. In the traditional perspective, everything is intimately linked with everything else.

The adept of budo, in mastering himself, can also contribute to the pacification of the world. By controlling his energies, he can reach a state where another energy can act through him. Indeed, it is fascinating to see or to feel this other dimension at work within oneself. It is remarkable to experience this energy that is the vehicle, support, and sustainer of the practitioner's efforts and that seems to transfigure the practitioner by its movement. Sometimes a master of advanced age can appear during a demonstration of his art to enter into a state of weightlessness, of grace, sustained by ki, inner energy, whereas in his daily life he is crippled by rheumatism and moves about only with difficulty.

To give an example, I was fortunate enough to be present at a demonstration by Tokuda Sensei at which, despite being more than eighty years old, he executed with astounding speed all the movements carried out by a samurai archer in battle to avoid the arrows of the enemy while shooting from a variety of positions. I also witnessed him giving the lesson of a real master during a workshop. He completely ignored all his disciples, a number of whom had come from a great distance, in order to work with extreme patience for a full half day with a physically handicapped child whom he wanted to teach to shoot. He delivered this lesson of sincere compassion in the face of the evident chagrin of those practitioners who had come from a long way to see him for a short time. This extraordinary man, a true bodhisattva, was fond of saying,

Be kind to others, to the bow, and to yourself. Be indulgent; don't make a big deal out of others faults but look instead at

what is positive in them. Listen to those around you, feel them, breathe them. In a *sharei* [series of group movements in kyudo], the practitioners should walk with the same rhythm, synchronize their breath, constitute a single body. Let go of your thoughts, of your tensions, of all intention. Be generous, make ample gestures, as though you were welcoming the universe. And then, little by little, the universe will enter into you and from that point on you will be one with it.

To my great surprise, I at one point discovered that the esoteric knowledge of the traditional schools is transmitted, not only orally, but also in *makimono*, secret scrolls, in the form of poems in code. A number of these were in ancient Chinese, so to translate them one had to know the meaning of thousands of rare ideograms. Some of these poems are veritable koans. They transmit secret techniques in the form of symbolic images. They give hints as to how to attain certain sensations, certain states of awareness, or they serve as a support for a meditation that will lead one in the direction of a correct attitude. For me, this was the discovery of a further dimension of the samurai. I saw that he had to be an accomplished scholar as well as a warrior. The samurai received the most complete possible education and training because his vocation was that of a gentleman, a member of the ruling class that governed Japan for several centuries after having supplanted the ancient aristocracy. Thus he not only had to master the martial disciplines and study the treatises on strategy, but also in order to do justice to his rank, he had to practice poetry, calligraphy, and tea ceremony. He had to possess a thorough knowledge of literature and even know the Chinese classics. Of course, we should not fail to mention the understanding of human psychology he also needed to possess in order to be a leader of men. The famous Miyamoto Musashi, considered by the Japanese to be the greatest warrior of all time, was also a calligrapher, a painter, a poet, and a renowned philosopher, whose works have come down to us through the centuries. In mentioning him here in this introduction, I must explain that he is not included in this collection, although he more than merits it, because his life and legend are so amply treated elsewhere, notably in the famous novel by Eiji Yoshikawa.

Jacques Normand and other masters of the martial arts are often also extraordinary storytellers. I have always been fascinated by this aspect of them. During classes in their dojos or in the course of their conversations at cafés and restaurants, they are quite fond of illustrating the principles of budo through maxims, poems, and edifying tales, or even through movements. The intonations of their voices tell you as much as their words. Their repertory includes Zen tales and even Taoist

tales of Chinese origin. These can be funny stories, true historical anecdotes, or more or less legendary accounts drawn from the lives of samurai, famous or obscure. I developed a passion for these stories and even began telling them myself. I brought some of them together in a first collection called *Martial Arts Teaching Tales of Power and Paradox*, published in 1980. This volume has since become a classic and has been translated into several languages. My passion for this material led me to become a professional storyteller and to participate, in France, in the Renouveau du Conte (Storytelling Revival). From that point on, I spent the greater part of my life collecting various versions of these tales, which have been embellished over the generations by storytellers as well as by the playwrights of Kabuki theater and Bunraku puppet theater. I have become devoted to rewriting these stories in such a way as to allow them to appear in their fullest form, with all their important elements included, and in such a way as to allow their profoundest meaning to resonate. This required me to meditate on the meaning of the stories for a long time. I have also restored them to their historical context and punctuated them with excerpts from poems that help to illuminate their significance.

The present collection is not meant to be exhaustive; rather it should be seen as an anthology of exemplary tales, exemplary in that they illustrate all the facets of wisdom and knowledge that a true samurai must embody: martial, spiritual, psychological, ethical, philosophical, artistic, strategic, and political. In these twenty-eight stories we can find the precious keys for understanding the history, civilization, and mentality of Japan. Here, picturesque and colorful characters come to life—complete unknowns or famous characters such as the three re-unifiers and pacifiers of Japan: Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. There are also figures from more recent times such as Yamaoka Tesshu, who lived at the end of the Edo period. He was one of the last samurai to embody the excellence of the warrior as well as the ideal of chivalry. He was at once a master of the sword and an eminent calligrapher. He was the tutor of the young Meiji emperor and a true bodhisattva.

These twenty-eight tales portray as many lessons to be meditated upon that will accompany us throughout our lives. They will help us understand how to deal with certain situations and to find meaning in our lives. These enlivening tales will bring us new energy and help us to not lose track of the essential. Through them we can gain the insight that allows us to retake the initiative in situations and to never give up. Like the Japanese doll Daruma, we always come back to our feet. This is the essential symbol of the samurai, who must be tried and proven until he has reached the point where his soul is fully tempered and true.

Seven times he falls, but eight times he gets up.

Pascal Fauliot

The Song of Kyudo

When the wind has subsided
And the sky is pure blue
One may glimpse
Over the mulberry hedge
A plume of mist, light and straight
White
Peaceful
Solitary.
That is the sensation of the *uchi okoshi*
The raising of the bow.

Wings powerfully spread
Like the eagle who comes from the sky
And passes through the clouds—
That is the sensation
Of bending the bow.

The hand that supports the arrow
Is the mother,
The hand that draws the bow
Is the father.
If they fail to be in harmony,
The child cannot be born.

At the moment of *ha na re*
The arrow flies.
Nothing exists anymore.
It is the *mu* of Zen.
Emptiness.

After the arrow is loosed,
Nothing stops
Something continues. . . .
It is the moment when water,
Troubled by movement,
Becomes clear again.
In this tranquillity
Stones and sand
Gently resettle

And everything resumes the journey
Of Eternity.

Poem by Jacques Normand based on the Precepts of the Bow

1 Making the Cuckoo Sing

ONE DAY the three great men who had reunified Japan at the end of the sixteenth century were sitting in a garden. They were Oda Nobunaga, the lord of the province of Owari; Toyotomi Hideyoshi, one of his generals; and Tokugawa Ieyasu, his powerful ally. A *hototogisu*, a bird of the cuckoo family, landed on the branch of a cherry tree. Someone proposed to the three great strategists that they engage in a poetry contest on the theme of "how to make a bird sing." Each of them replied with a haiku that revealed his true nature and presaged the future.

Nobunaga came out with his verse first:

> Hototogisu
> If you won't sing
> I will wring your neck!

The daimyo of Owari was known for his hot-headed temperament. He was called the Demon King. A tactician who slaughtered his enemies mercilessly, he had succeeded in conquering several provinces. He was betrayed by one of his vassals and had to commit seppuku before he was able to finish reunifying Japan.

Then Hideyoshi, with a malicious smile, recited the following:

> Hototogisu,
> I will find a way
> To make you sing!

Hideyoshi had the nickname *saru*, the monkey, and he was as sly and ugly as a macaque. Despite being the son of a poor farmer, he rose to an exceptional position in a Japan that was entirely based on class hierarchy. He was cunning and intrepid, a gifted speaker, and a

politician of subtlety. It was he who finished reuniting Japan and obtained the supreme power for himself.

Finally, Ieyasu recited his poem:

Hototogisu
I will wait
Until you feel like singing.

And in fact this young lord of high lineage proved very capable of waiting for his moment to arrive. He was a man of patience, shrewdness, and caution. His nickname was *furu tanuki*, the Japanese equivalent of “old fox.” In the end, he took power from Hideyoshi’s son and completed the pacification of Japan. He founded the dynasty of the Tokugawa shoguns, which ruled the country for more than two centuries.

2 The Duel on the Gojo Bridge

In Kyoto, on the Gojo Bridge, the formidable monk-warrior Benkei stood waiting. He was a formidable figure, as big and broad as a sumo wrestler. Each night, brandishing his battle pike, his naginata, he barred the way over the wooden span to any samurai who might be bold enough to try to cross it. His custom was to provoke the samurai he met on the bridge into duels, and when he defeated them he confiscated their swords, or *katanas*—for Benkei had sworn an oath to take one thousand katanas from warriors of the Heike clan, a clan that had seized political power and was making abusive use of it. Benkei planned to sell the swords to pay for the reconstruction of a certain temple. Being a past master of the martial arts, possessed of colossal strength and amazing speed, he had already disarmed nine hundred and ninety-nine samurai. He only had to confiscate one more sword to fulfill his oath.

That night, at the hour of the cow, a tuneful sound was heard from the far side of the bridge. Amid the curling wisps of mist rising from the river, Benkei saw a slender figure approaching, playing a flute. The flute player was wrapped in folds of richly decorated silken kimonos, and the face was hidden beneath the veils of a wide-brimmed hat. The monk-warrior stood aside to permit the passage of this personage, whom he took to be a woman. But when out of politeness he discreetly lowered his gaze, he saw, protruding from the passing figure's *obi*, the handle of a sword of very great value.

"Who are you?" Benkei called out in a gruff voice.

The figure continued its graceful progress across the bridge without answering and without ceasing to bring forth melodious music from the bamboo flute. With mind-boggling dexterity, using the butt end of his naginata, the fearsome monk lifted the veils of the wide-brimmed hat. The mysterious person whirled about and regarded him with fury in his eyes.

"What insolence, boor! What manners are these for dealing with a

gentleman!? Beg forgiveness at once!"

Benkei saw that, despite its feminine air, the figure standing before him was a young man.

"I asked you a question," Benkei said, "but you did not show me the courtesy of a reply. I can see clearly enough now that you are one of those pretentious pages who serves at the Heike court!"

"Really now, arrogant monk, you are becoming more offensive by the second. It seems I might have to teach you a lesson!

"Goodness me, imagine that! The little lion cub bares its claws. It considers itself the equal of the warrior called the Demon of Mount Hiei. But I won't trouble myself with squashing a mere gnat. Come then, give me your sword and I'll let you pass."

With humor in his eye and mockery in his smile, the young man issued a challenge: "Take it yourself, if you can!"

The burly monk struck out at the offender with lightning speed, only to find his arm flailing in the void. The youth had sidestepped with the agility of a cat. With his next attack, Benkei was able to grab the flute, which he angrily threw down onto the bridge. With a dry rattling sound, it rolled along the planks. The youth set his hand on the hilt of his sword and said, "I don't know what is keeping me from ending your life! That flute was the only keepsake I had left from my mother."

Taking his battle pike in both hands, the monk took the en garde position and roared, "All right, that's it! Draw your sword and let's get it over with! Since you want to play the samurai, I'll give you a taste of my naginata!"

The youth let go of the handle of his sword and drew his fan from his belt.

"This little accessory will do the job," he replied.

Insulted to the core, fearsome Benkei decided to give the brat a spanking with the flat of his blade. The young page dodged the blade of the pike, leapt over its shaft, and struck the giant on the forehead with his fan. Furious, the mountain of muscle began twirling his weapon in such a way that cut followed thrust with the speed of the paddles of a mill wheel in a rapid current.

Like a graceful butterfly on wings of silk, the page fluttered and swirled, as ungraspable as the reflections of the moon taking a thousand forms on the waves of the river. The boastful monk, his skull now dripping with sweat, his breath coming short, was being forced to change his tactics. One by one, he tried all his secret moves—in vain. For a moment, he thought he was fighting a *yokai* (a phantom), a *tengu* (a spirit that takes different forms), or a *kitsune* (a fox spirit).

The monk muttered a mantra under his breath. For a moment he put his hands together in prayer, then he resumed the fight. Finally,

believing he had trapped his opponent against the railing of the bridge, he called up all his remaining strength to deliver a final vicious blow.

At the last instant, the youth dodged away. The blade of the naginata buried itself in the wood of the railing. It stuck so deep that the huge man was unable to pull it out. While he was laboring at the shaft, the young man, with a blow of his delicate foot, sent him sprawling over the planks. Benkei got to his feet, staggering with fatigue, and tried to draw his sword. He let out a yell—his scabbard was empty! Dumbfounded, he saw that the young devil was holding his katana. The monk-warrior went down on his knees and spoke words that were bitter in his mouth.

"Me, who has never been beaten, to be disarmed by a mere novice—what shame! I beg of you, use my sword to take my life! Wash away this insult with my blood and let my dishonor be short-lived!"

The page lowered the sword and replied, "I shall spare you. I shall content myself with having given you this little lesson, which I actually found quite entertaining. And so now, go back to your monastery and meditate on the mysteries of this world of illusion."

"O, noble youth, magnanimous conqueror, be so kind as to let me know your name."

"I am called Ushiwakamaru, but my real name is Minamoto no Yoshitsune."

"So you are the youngest son of the great Yoshitomo who was so traitorously murdered by those accursed Heike! O, young lord, I owe you my life and I offer it to you. Do me the honor of taking me into your service."

"Granted," replied Yoshitsune, giving him back his sword.

"And grant me also the favor of telling me who did such a good job of teaching you the art of fighting."

"Know that it was Sojobo, the king of the tengu of Mount Kumara!"

THERE YOU HAVE IT. This is how generations of storytellers have shaped and polished the story of this famous first encounter. There are many versions of the tale, and some of them recount that the famous king of the tengu was none other than the head of the Yamabushi brotherhood of Mount Kumara. In Japanese folklore, the tengu are supernatural spirits, winged genies with long noses. They wear the clothing and ornaments of the Yamabushi mountain hermits, who devote themselves to ascetic practices and, some say, develop magical powers.

So it was in this way that Benkei became the faithful companion of Yoshitsune, the finest flower of samurai culture, a model of chivalry whose virtues have been sung down through the centuries by blind bards and monastic storytellers accompanying themselves on the *biwa*,

the customary instrument of bards recounting epic tales. The monk-warrior served his master until his death. Together Yoshitsune and Benkei, master and servant, went from victory to victory. The young strategist was able to destroy the Heike and return political power to his elder brother, the head of the Genji clan. The two warriors also experienced exile: for due to the jealousy of his brother, who became the first Kamakura shogun, Yoshitsune was forced to take refuge in a distant province. And it was Benkei, who when all was lost, made a rampart of his own body to give his lord the time to complete his ritual suicide. The storytellers recount that the huge man, riddled with arrows, died on his feet, leaning on his famous naginata. Even when he was dead, the enemy dared not approach him, so greatly were they in awe of him. It was not until a gust of wind blew the giant over that they finally dared to pass.

And we are told that the last conversation between Benkei and Yoshitsune, which took place in the court of the castle that had just fallen to the enemy, was this poetic dialog that celebrated their legendary friendship:

> “O, my lord, if you are the one who must depart first,
> Wait for me at the fork of the road to hell!”

> “We will remain together, dear companion,
> In the other world and in the lives to come
> Until on a crimson cloud
> We ascend to paradise!”

3 The Samurai and the Zen Cat

In spite of all his prowess as a master of the martial arts, a certain samurai found himself incapable of getting rid of a large rat that had set up housekeeping in his home and was making a continual nuisance of itself. The rodent was very alert and extremely cunning. It could dodge any sword blow and was too smart for any trap. So the master of the house was finally driven to his last resort. He went to the marketplace to buy a cat. He found a merchant who seemed to have what he was looking for and returned home with a young and vigorous male cat. After a week of meowing, pouncing, and frantic chases around the house, the spirited young tom remained without a catch.

So the disappointed samurai went back to the market to return the cat to the merchant. The latter at once began touting the merits of his latest acquisition, a striped male cat in the prime of life. If you went by what the merchant said, a better rat hunter would never be found.

And in truth, the new arrival quickly showed itself to be both more experienced and more subtle than his predecessor. It waited in ambush behind pieces of furniture for hours at a time. It stole furtively about close to the walls, creeping slowly so as not to arouse attention. But after a week, the rat was still running free. Furious, the sword-bearing householder returned the cat to the merchant and demanded his money back.

The samurai was in the habit of paying regular visits to a Zen monk from a nearby temple. He found himself telling the monk about his problem.

"Well," the monk responded, "you should borrow our old cat for a while. Thanks to him, we have no rodents here." And he took the samurai into the dojo, where asleep on a *zafu*, a meditation cushion, lay a somewhat decrepit, plump old tomcat, with a half bald head that looked as though it had been tonsured. The warrior brought the old puss back home and deposited it, still asleep, on a tatami mat, where it

continued snoozing away, giving not the slightest sign of knowing it had changed residences.

The attitude of the monastic feline was extremely irritating. It spent its time sleeping on the tatami, always in the same place near the fire, without getting up except to eat its food or see to its basic needs. You could believe that it had taken on the worse habits of certain monks, who after filling their bellies, sit zazen for hours while picking their noses!

Not a week had passed before the samurai carried this useless creature with a mouth not worth feeding back to the temple.

“Don’t be so impatient,” the monk exclaimed. “Keep him a little while longer. Trust me. I’m positive that in the end he will provide you with complete satisfaction.”

Skeptical, the gentleman took the old tom back home. One day followed another without any change in the cat’s attitude. And as the proverb says, “When the cat sleeps, the mice dance.” In this case, the rat made itself more and more comfortable. It even became so bold as to sample the food waiting to be stewed over the fire, frightening the daylights out of the maid. Since the old tomcat still showed no sign of moving, the rodent now paid it no more heed than it would to a stuffed animal. And one day, as the rat was trotting by in paw range, with a sudden move, the Zen cat seized it. In a flash, it was a dead rat!

The samurai, who had witnessed the scene from a distance, could hardly believe his eyes. He at once recalled one of the principles of Chinese strategy: numb the vigilance of the enemy. He returned the old tom and made a gift to the temple. Then he meditated on the lesson he had learned and, it is said, made considerable progress in his practice of swordsmanship.

4 The Three Bonsai

One day during the Kamakura period, a monk was making his way toward an isolated hamlet in the province of Kazuke. His head was covered by a hood and over that he wore a straw hat. His body was bent over and the rings on his walking stick jangled as he walked along. Snowflakes flew about in the air, blown by an icy wind—the vanguard of the army of General Winter. The monk knocked on the door of the first hut he came to. A woman, whose elegant mien contrasted sharply with her rustic surroundings, came to the door.

"Venerable one, to what do we owe the honor of your visit? Have you lost your way? We would gladly give you alms, but we are ashamed of how little we have to give you."

"Thank you so much for your kindness. I just wanted to know if perhaps there was a temple or an inn somewhere in the area where I might spend the night."

A graying man who was sitting by the fire got up and took a few steps toward the traveler. The monk noted his martial bearing and saw that he wore a *wakizashi*, the short sword of a samurai, in his belt.

"You will neither find an inn nor a temple within ten leagues of here. Night would fall on you before you got there, and it would do a body no good to spend the night outdoors in such a snowstorm. It would be better if you slept here."

"I wouldn't want to impose on you."

"Allow me to insist. Helping one another is a duty, and the presence of a holy man is a blessing. You can get back on the road tomorrow morning."

The monk shook the snow off his clothes and took off his hat and his straw boots before going in. His face was partially hidden by his monk's haircut. He took a seat near the fire with his hosts. The woman of the house, with a sad air, served nothing but a bowl of millet soup for the evening meal.

“It embarrasses me,” she said, “that I have nothing more to serve you. We have fallen on hard times of late. I would never have imagined we would come to live in such poverty.”

“Don’t be upset,” the monk replied, “this suits me perfectly. This is just what we usually eat in the monasteries. Forgive my indiscretion, but how did it come to pass that such distinguished people as yourselves ended up in a remote corner like this?”

“We are in exile. A tragic family event has forced us to leave our lands and go into hiding here.”

The fire was beginning to die down. There was nothing left of it but a few embers that glowed red every now and then when a draft blew in through the cracks in the hovel’s walls. The winds of the blizzard were moaning in the rafters. The host got up from his seat, saying, “We don’t have any firewood left. Winter came upon us before I had time to get more from the forest. So be it. I’ll sacrifice the last of our three little friends who still keep us company.”

He went to a corner of the room and brought back a bonsai plum tree, which he put down next to the fire. He drew his short sword to lop the branches.

“What are you doing?” the monk reproached him.

Throwing a handful of branches onto the fire, the host replied, “Never could a samurai allow a guest of his to sit shivering in his house.”

“This shouldn’t be necessary. You could get a good price for those bonsai!”

“Bonsai were once my passion. I brought ten of them along with us to this place. I have already sold the others and I don’t have a penny left. So what’s the point of prolonging our futile existence?”

And he threw the rest of the dwarf plum tree onto the fire. The flames crept over it, drawing a heart-wrenching sound from the wood.

“Don’t give up hope!” cried the monk, using the back of his sleeve to wipe away the tears from the corners of his eyes. “Nothing lasts forever in this world of impermanence. Perhaps one day fortune will smile on you again.”

“I don’t believe that anymore,” the samurai replied. “The feeling I have about myself is of an old tree that will never flower again.”

“Forgive me for asking you, but just what was it that brought you to this unfortunate state?”

“Why should we hide it from you any longer? My name is Tsuneyo Genzayemon. I was formerly the daimyo of Sano. Members of my clan plotted together to dispossess me. I chose exile rather than forcing a fratricidal war. Since the accusations against me were false and I had done nothing wrong, I did not commit seppuku. My suicide would only have justified the traitors.”

“But why didn’t you demand justice from the Kamakura shogunate?”

“When these events occurred, the Regent was away on a journey. I quickly saw that my enemies had corrupted several of the shogunate’s high dignitaries and that my case would not be upheld. But what’s the point of stirring up the embers of the past?”

As he was speaking, the master of the house had cut up his remaining two bonsai and burned them, a cherry tree and a pine. In the light of the flames arising from the little trees, the monk spotted the reflections of an old rusty suit of armor that stood in a place of honor in an alcove with a lance and sword of fine make.

“Why did you not sell your warrior’s gear? It’s obviously worth a small fortune.”

“As long as I am a samurai, as long as there is breath left in me, I will be at the beck and call of my lord and master, the Regent. If one day I should come to his mind and he should call upon me for my service, I will set off at once and rally to his banner. And I will fight for him to the death! Since I would prefer that glorious end to this execrable existence . . . But forgive me for burdening you with the insignificant story of my miserable life. You have been traveling, you are tired, and it is time for you to sleep.”

The following morning the wandering monk took advantage of a calm in the storm to resume his journey. After having warmly thanked his hosts and encouraged them to keep their hopes up, he disappeared among the glistening folds of the mantle of snow that had now transfigured the landscape.

When the first breezes of spring began to blow, a messenger came knocking on the door of the hut. He brought word that the Regent was summoning all his vassals to Kamakura to embark on a campaign. Without hesitation, the old samurai saddled his old horse, put on his armor, and set out on the road to the capital of the shogunate. His arrival in the castle court was the object of considerable attention. The gathered knights, proudly flaunting their heraldic insignia and gleaming armor, capered about on their spirited horses and kept up a steady stream of mockery and laughter, ridiculing the old daimyo of Sano. With his rusting armor and decrepit nag, he had the sorry look of a ronin. But to everyone’s surprise, a page came to meet the lord of Sano. The page politely requested the old man to follow him, announcing so that all could hear that the Regent wanted to have a talk with him.

In the formal reception hall, the veteran knight knelt on the tatamis and prostrated to Hojo Tokiyori and his ministers.

“So there you are, Tsuneyo Genzayemon, lord of Sano. Despite your misfortune, you have kept your word as a worthy and loyal samurai. Your conduct is exemplary.”

The old warrior raised his head and at that moment he recognized the monk to whom he had given lodging. He was none other than the Regent himself, who sometimes traveled about incognito so that he could assess the state of his empire for himself.

“Based on the findings of an inquiry I had conducted, I now reconfirm you as the chief of your clan and restore your fief to you. I have made up a list of the names of those who were involved in the conspiracy against you, the traitors as well as their accomplices. They will be arrested and punished without delay. And in memory of the three bonsai you sacrificed to provide heat for a humble pilgrim, I hereby make a gift to you of the following domains: Plum Tree Field in Kaga, Cherry Tree Spring in Echu, and Pine Branch Manor in Kozuke.”

5 The Courtesan and the Torturer

After the victory at Dan no Ura that put an end to the interminable war in which the Heike were all but wiped out, the new shogun, Minamoto no Yoritomo, gave the order that all the surviving clan chiefs of the defeated army should be killed. Hunting them down took years, but in the end there was nothing left of the once-so-powerful clan but the legendary epic of Heike Monogatari.

Akoya was a courtesan of high degree who carried out her activities among the notables of Kyoto's most distinguished society. She was notorious for having been the mistress of Kagekiyo, the great Heike general, who was said to have been the father of her two children. The defeated general had continued to elude capture, and the most alarming rumors were being spread about him, saying that he was the head of a conspiracy, that he was fomenting a revolt, that he was planning to assassinate the shogun, and so on. Beautiful Akoya was suspected of hiding him or, at the least, knowing where his hiding place was. The lords Hatakeyama Shigetada and Iwanaga Saemon, who had been put in charge of the affair, had her arrested and brought to Shigetada's mansion to undergo interrogation. The lord of the manor was a refined and benevolent man. He was highly literate and a lover of art. He interrogated the sublime courtesan, famed through all Kyoto for her talent as a musician and singer, with tact and discretion. She claimed to know nothing and to have received no word at all from her lover, and in frustration Saemon, who was also present and was known for his coarseness and cruelty, threatened her with torture. But this threat did nothing to loosen her tongue, so he ordered his guards to deliver her at once into the experienced hands of his torture expert. This was too much for Shigetada. To him it was unbearable that this divine flower of the floating world should be subjected to such a fate.

"Wait!" he cried. Then he took his cruder partner aside and whispered in his ear that he had a better idea.

“Show a little subtlety. A woman in love will never betray her lover, especially if he is also the father of her children. Even if she is tortured to death, she won’t tell us anything. In any case, it is absolutely necessary for her to remain alive. Sooner or later, her lover will try to get back in contact with her. Let’s keep a watch on her house. That’s the best chance we have of getting our hands on Kagekiyo. In the meantime, let’s try one more time to find out if she is still his mistress and if she knows something. I know from experience that psychological torture is the most effective means. Allow me to continue to interrogate her in my own way.”

Saemon let himself be talked into this approach and Shigetada spoke to the courtesan.

“Kagekiyo was your lover. That is a notorious fact, known to everyone. Is he still? Allow me to cast doubt on that possibility. Our informants have told us that during his escape he fell in love with Princess Ono and married her in secret. Did you know that?”

Her eyes moistened with the dew of tears, Akoya replied, “I’m hearing it from you for the first time.”

With a sardonic smile, her interrogator answered: “That being the case, it’s easy for me to believe you have no news of him. Your lover has callously abandoned you.”

This was music to Saemon’s ears. The coarse fellow wriggled with pleasure. He was developing a taste for this psychological torture thing.

“So now,” Shigetada continued cunningly, “it may still be unavoidable to torture you in order to get to the bottom of this. I am curious to know what bonds still link you that scoundrel Kagekiyo. So I am going to have three instruments of torture brought.”

He clapped his hands and gave the following order: “Bring me a *koto*, a *shamisen*, and a *kokyu*!” He had the instruments put down in front of the diva and then said, “Sing us three songs of love, and we will know the true depths of your feelings.”

Reluctantly, the beauty tuned the koto. Her fingers flowed over the strings and her voice came forth as pure as jade, causing the paper of the *shojis* to tremble. A spell was cast. An infinite sadness pervaded the room as if a goddess had descended, bringing with her the longing of heaven itself.

The second song, accompanied on the shamisen, penetrated the hearts of the two samurai more keenly than a dagger. And the third, sung to the strains of the kokyu, made even pitiless Saemon cry.

Employing all his shrewdness and cunning, Shigetada turned to his companion and asked him: “Do you think it is possible for a heart as pure as that to lie?”

Saemon, shaking with sobs, shook his head no. Then the master of the

house whispered in his ear, “Let us allow her to return home. Now that she knows she has been deceived, she might commit an indiscretion and betray her lover.”

And Saemon agreed. So in this way, Shigetada saved this sublime courtesan, this princess of the floating world of willows and flowers, from the hands of the torturer.

His strategy had another result as well. In the end it also brought about the demise of the Heike general. But that is another long story.

6 The Arrows of the Mori

In the twilight of his life, Motonari, the chief of the Mori clan, one of the greatest strategists of his time, called his three sons together. He took three arrows from a quiver and gave one arrow to each of them. He told them to go ahead and break them right in half. The three bamboo shafts bent and broke easily in the sons' samurai hands. The father took out a new set of three arrows and tied them together with a bit of straw. He handed the bundle to one of his sons and ordered him to break it. But despite all his efforts, the bamboo shafts did not yield to him, even when he tried to break them over his knee. The bundle of arrows went from hand to hand, from the eldest brother to the youngest, without any of them being able to break it.

The sons were crestfallen at their failure, but the clan chief gave a mocking little laugh and had the following to say:

"I hope you won't forget this little lesson. If you remain united, our clan will survive, but if you become divided, it will perish."

7 The Art of Winning without a Fight

On huge Lake Biwa, really an inland sea in Japan, a ferryboat with a number of passengers was sailing along. Among them was a samurai who was animatedly showing off in front of a group of lovely flowers of the floating world. He was a bit tipsy and was recounting his feats of derring-do, encouraged by the appreciative little cries of his admirers. To listen to him, you would think he was the greatest warrior who had ever lived.

In the stern, another samurai, somewhat older, appeared to be lost in his thoughts. He demonstratively turned his back on this boastful performance, preferring to contemplate the rainbow reflections of the setting sun on the wake of the boat. The braggart took umbrage at this and he called out to his fellow warrior.

"You appear not to believe my little anecdotes. Maybe you think I'm telling tall tales."

"Excuse me? Please pardon me, I wasn't really listening to what you were saying. It was something about your prowess in handling a sword. Such things really don't interest me anymore these days."

"All the same, you are the bearer of the two swords. How can a samurai survive without knowing how to use them? Although it's true that nowadays, there are cowardly fellows around who have nothing more of the warrior about them than the appearance of one!"

The older warrior turned away without heeding the insult. It was as though he had not heard it. This behavior only served to further enrage the vain young man. Taking advantage of a rocking of the boat that had caused a peasant to brush against the sheath of his katana, he shouted, "Miserable boor, you have bumped into a samurai and failed to excuse yourself. That cannot go without punishment!"

The peasant prostrated at the young man's feet and begged for forgiveness.

"It's too late. Get off the boat immediately. Out of my sight, you

insolent lout!”

And the cocky braggart grabbed hold of the peasant and prepared to throw him overboard.

“Hold it! Let him be. He has apologized. That should be enough for you.”

Thrilled to have finally gotten a rise out of the older samurai, the young fellow sniggered and said in a loud voice, “Hey there, ho there! The gentleman comes to the defense of this shameless cur! He criticizes me in public. So he has some guts after all, and he’s ready to give me a lesson. Very well then, but you better watch out. I am an expert of the *muteki ryu*, the School of Invincibility.”

“Ah, well, as for me, I’m just a run-of-the-mill practitioner of the *mute katsu ryu*, the School of Victory with No Hands, or the art of winning without a fight.”

The inebriated samurai gave a loud laugh, then replied, “You claim you can beat me without using your swords. Hey, I’d love to see that! Go ahead and give me a demonstration right away! En garde!”

With a disarming smile, the adept of the nonviolent school replied, “You think we should fight here, on the boat? But you are failing to consider the possibility that we might injure someone or fall in the water. No. If you insist, let’s do it on that island in the middle of the lake.”

The champion of the sword ordered the sailors to land the boat. The moment the boat ground ashore in the midst of some reeds, the excited young samurai leapt onto the land and took the en garde position. But his adversary stayed on the boat, even as he drew his two swords from his belt. To make it very clear that he was not going to use them, he handed them to one of the boatmen; and without losing a moment, he took advantage of being near the boatman to grab his pole and push the boat away from the shore.

As the boat, caught at once by the current, rapidly moved away from the island, the samurai on the shore waved his hands and shouted at the top of his lungs, “But what are you doing, you coward?! Come back and fight. You’re not going to leave me here!”

Cupping his hands around his mouth, the master shouted back, “I hope you appreciate my demonstration of the art of winning without a fight!”

The fellow who had pulled off this little caper was none other than Tsukuhara Bokuden, the greatest swordsman of his time. He had been through scores of duels and fought in a dozen battles and had never been beaten. His reputation was such that he had been taken on as master of arms by several daimyos as well as a shogun. He had nothing left to prove, and he knew that even a simple clash of swords, even a

friendly one fought with *bokken*, wooden swords, could prove fatal. Over the course of the years, he had become a *kensei*, a saint of the sword. He never ceased trying to perfect himself. He challenged himself again and again until finally he came to embody the truth he pursued. This truth can be expressed in three words: *ken zen ichinyo*, the sword and Zen are one. He was full of the kind of compassion that leads a genuine master to avoid spilling blood when it is not really necessary.

8 The Tiger of Kai and the Dragon of Echigo

Zen has no other secret than that of meditating seriously on life and death.

—Takeda Shingen

During the Sengoku period, the Japanese era of warring kingdoms, the Empire of the Rising Sun was wracked for nearly a century and a half by continuous civil war. Having completely lost their authority, the emperor and the shogun had become no more than figureheads. Provincial governors and clan chiefs had seized their independence and were engaged in perpetual wars to maintain or expand their territories. The most powerful of them dreamed of taking the lion's share and extending their rule over the entire country. They thought the time to establish peace was when they ruled over all. But a wind from hell continued to fan the flames of this apocalyptic chaos. The Buddhist sects also took advantage of the turmoil to extend their influence and even came to control entire regions of the country. Alliances, acts of treason, assassinations, succession battles, vendettas, uprisings, and widespread thirst for power inevitably plunged the nation again and again into an ocean of blood and tears. The Namban, the European barbarians in the south with their long noses, and the Jesuits who were with them, also were advancing their pieces on the board of this huge-scale game of go. Their galleons, loaded with fresh arms, added further elements to the confusion: harquebuses, cannons, and conversions. Some warlords saw in the Europeans and their religion a factor that could strengthen their independence and bring them the support of powerful allies. Other lords understood that courting the foreigners was throwing open the gates to the colonization of an empire that even the Mongols had never been able to invade; for those lords, now was the time to strike a decisive blow against the Europeans before the dismembered body of their country was thrown to these foreign wolves from hell.

One of this latter visionary sort of man was Takeda Shingen, the Tiger

of Kai. A strategist without peer and a wise administrator, he had modernized his army and was continuously expanding and consolidating his domain. He had revolutionized the art of war in Japan by relying heavily on a contingent of samurai mounted on horses whose traditional bows he replaced with lances. Shingen's mounted lancers had great mobility and striking power. They were a devastating force in battle. And as if that were not enough, he was also one of the first warlords to equip his soldiers with firearms.

Having conquered the huge province of Shinano, Shingen was now one of the most powerful of all the daimyos and soon found himself vying for the supreme power. But as he was advancing his armies, he ran afoul of young Uesugi Kenshin, the lord of the neighboring fief, whose domain he was threatening. Kenshin wasted no time in assuming the leadership of a coalition opposing Shingen. The young daimyo had been trained at the great school of warrior monks on Mount Hiei. Having taken his place as a new warlord on the feudal game board, he had quickly shown himself to be a tactician of genius and had become known as the Dragon of Echigo.

From skirmish to skirmish and set battle to set battle, the two men fought each other for many years without either one of them succeeding in coming out on top. Though they were sworn enemies, there was mutual respect between them, and their appreciation of each other went to the extent of genuine admiration. Japan is a complex country, a country of sharp contrasts—in its climate and geography and in its taste for tradition as well as its thirst for modernity. In these particularly troubled times, the country's paradoxical qualities reached a high point. Refinement and cruelty, a code of chivalry and acts of felony, spirituality and barbarism—all these occurred side by side, sometimes in the same person. It was like the endless dance of yin and yang, an unforgiving struggle of good and evil. Amazingly, this time of civil war was also the golden age of the tea ceremony, of the Zen garden, of Noh theater, and of international commerce. A decisive movement toward the modernization of the country took place at this time.

Shingen and Kenshin were no exception to the contradictions of their period. They were formidable warriors, inspired poets, and adepts of the Way of the Buddha, who did not hesitate to take religious vows while continuing to ride full speed through the dust of the profane world and the fields of battle. Their Buddhist names sound like reversed homonyms. Shingen and Kenshin were like two sides of the same coin, reflections of each other in the mirror. The destiny of these two rivals was an extraordinary one. In their ruthless combat, neither succeeded in defeating the other, and even less were they capable of becoming allies and thus ruling the empire together.

In the year 1501, the two daimyos found themselves preparing for a final battle at Kawanakajima, a fertile plain surrounded by mountains at the confluence of the Sai and Chikuma rivers. It was the fourth time that the armies of the Takeda and Uesugi clans had faced off against each other at this strategic location on the border of their respective provinces. The first three encounters had been characterized by inconclusive clashes, interminable sieges, and strategic withdrawals in the face of General Winter. Neither side had been able to defeat the other. This time an end had to come. This had to be the decisive battle.

Both sides were firmly entrenched in their positions on opposite banks of the river, with their backs to fortifications on the heights behind them. (Shingen was on the west side of the river, Kenshin on the east.) The two warlords were observing each other, gauging the size of each other's forces, contemplating possible strikes, trying to divine the secret intentions of the adversary. They prudently moved their pawns around, creating diversions, analyzing the information they received from their spies, studying the terrain. The force of numbers favored Takeda Shingen. He had amassed an army of close to twenty thousand men. Uesugi Kenshin had only about fifteen thousand. But no one had yet made a clear move.

After a week of observation, the grand maneuvers began. The Tiger of Kai had the main body of his army very visibly take up a position on the heights facing Kenshin's established encampment on the hill of Saijoyama across the Chikuma River on the eastern bank.

Shingen's heraldic banner featured four lozenges in which were depicted the four elements of his motto: *fu, rin, ka, san*. This was a condensation of the fundamental rules of Chinese strategy:

> Fast like the Wind,
> Silent like the Forest.
> Consuming like Fire.
> Immoveable like the Mountain.

Applying the first two principles, in the night Shingen moved a second contingent of eight thousand warriors by forced march but in absolute silence. This stealth force took up its position on the Plain of Hachimanbara on the eastern side of the Chikuma River, where Kenshin's camp was, hoping to surprise the enemy from the rear. When dawn came, Shingen's army, deployed in the famous formation known poetically as the "wings of the crane," closed its formation in order to crush the enemy in a pincer movement. At least that is what Shingen was planning. But he was unaware that during the night, his brother-enemy, having been warned by his spies or having intuited Shingen's tactic, had also very discreetly changed his position. Applying one of the

thirty-six principles of Chinese strategy known as “exchanging the position of the guest and the host,” Kenshin had abandoned his established camp, forded the river, and grouped the main body of his troops at the weak point of Shingen’s formation. Kenshin was not far from Shingen’s command post, which had only his personal guard of two thousand elite samurai to defend it.

In the hours following dawn, surprise was total at Shingen’s camp. His main army was spread too thin. His “wings of the crane” formation was broken by a completely unexpected and highly concentrated charge of the Echigo cavalry. Kenshin pounded this wedge through the breach and cut the enemy army in two. He deployed his squadrons in the “whirling wheel” formation, to devastating effect. This was a tactic in which, when the first of his assailants were exhausted with fighting, they withdrew to the side to make room for a new wave of Kenshin’s samurai to take its place. Shingen’s army gave way, abandoning large numbers of corpses on the field, not the least of which was Shingen’s brother, who had taken part in this engagement.

From his command post, the Tiger of Kai saw that his situation was untenable. He tried to find ways to minimize the damage and gave his orders, but they had little effect. It was then that he heard the sound that was a sure sign of a cavalry attack, a rumble that shook the earth like the skin of a big war drum. His personal guard was crushed. Through the clouds of dust, Takeda Shingen saw the first of the enemy cavalry coming on. At their head, he recognized by his characteristic hairdo the warrior-monk Kenshin. His sworn enemy, a formidable swordsman, had taken the insane risk of leading the charge in person with the hope of killing his rival himself. It was high time to finally bring this rivalry to a conclusion.

This was an act of chivalry on Kenshin’s part in more ways than one. The death of one of the two clan chiefs would no doubt mean the end of this war. And there was no greater honor for a daimyo than to be killed by one of his peers. Though single combat between lords was rather rare even in the time of the samurai, here was a case where single combat could forestall many a useless massacre.

The two lords measured each other with their eyes. Suddenly Kenshin galloped his horse at Shingen. The older lord did not budge from his campaign stool. The horse-borne knight, his sword raised, was only a few yards away, when he shouted a question.

“What sense do you have of yourself at this moment?”

With this the duel suddenly moved into a different dimension. Knowing that Takeda Shingen was an adept of Zen, Kenshin had challenged him with a koan. Without the slightest loss of composure, the older daimyo is said to have replied, “Like a snowflake in a roaring

furnace."

Riveted to his seat, he merely used his *gunbai*, the military fan used by a leader of samurai to signal orders to his generals, to parry the ferocious blow of Kenshin's sword.

After this first assault, Kenshin wheeled his horse to charge again.

Immoveable like the Mountain.

Takeda Shingen, faithful to the last principle of his motto, still did not budge. As though he were its hub, he waited impassively for the terrible millwheel of destiny to finish grinding its grain. He could have unsheathed his sword, tried to take shelter a bit farther away, or even mounted a horse. What was he thinking? Perhaps he was remembering the tragic ends of other clan chiefs who had lost their own lives as well as the lives of their men by becoming separated from their personal guards.

Immoveable like the Mountain.

The warrior-monk swung his blade again to cut down this rival alter ego of his. Shingen again tried to parry with his fan, but unfortunately this time he was only partly successful, and the Dragon's blade cut a gash in his helmet. Shocked and groggy, blinded by the blood running down his forehead, the Tiger of Kai heard the gallop of the Dragon of Echigo's horse bearing down on him for a third time. But just as it seemed that all was lost, the Dragon's horse crumbled to the ground and its master went rolling in the tall grass. A samurai from Shingen's guard, a virtuoso of the naginata, the battle pike, had fought his way back to his master just in time and had used his long weapon to slash the hamstrings of the Dragon's steed. As the naginata man stood there, ready to protect the body of his wounded daimyo with his own, some of Kenshin's warriors appeared, picked their leader up off the ground, and dragged him to a safe distance. Hardly in the saddle again, Kenshin thought to ride back to deliver the coup de grace to his enemy. But it was too late. The moment had passed. The Dragon's warriors were retreating in total disarray. His entire army had taken flight. The stealth force of eight thousand men that Takeda had sent to the other side of the hill in the night, had at last understood the trap Kenshin had laid. They had come running to the rescue and attacked the Dragon's troops from behind. The Dragon's troops also chose this moment to remember the fearsome reputation of Takeda's cavalry, known far and wide as the most murderous of all.

Fleeing in complete panic, the army of Echigo tried to get back across the broad river. The fording places were scattered and narrow. The fleeing troops were destroyed both by the water in front of them and the steel behind. This last mortal dance of the Tiger and the Dragon had bled them white. This was the last time they were ever to see each other

close up. And yet once again, this encounter had been like a sword cutting water. There was no winner and no loser.

The Tiger and the Dragon had again weakened and neutralized each other. Other daimyos now formed an alliance and marched on the capital. The Tiger and the Dragon had been no more than instruments in the hands of Hachiman, the god of war and the great protector of Japan, who fixed them in their places and left the way open to Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. And there is no doubt that these three great reunifiers of Japan learned the lessons of the epic conflict of the two titans.

> Forty-nine years, but one night's dream.
> A whole glorious life no more than a mouthful of sake.
> Of life and death, what have I truly understood?
> Beyond Heaven and Hell,
> I stand here in the brightening light of the moon,
> Free from the clouds of attachment.
>
> —Uesugi Kenshin

9 The Cherry-Tree Branch

Study the art of poetry. It would be shameful for a samurai to have neither the sensibility nor the aptitude for this art.

—from the Code of Conduct of the Odawara Hojo clan

A POWERFUL DAIMYO was traveling with his retinue. Along the way, he stopped at the manor house of one of his vassals. He was of course received with all the honors. Following a sumptuous ceremonial meal accompanied by the very best sake, the lord took a tour of the garden. He spent time contemplating the cherry trees in blossom but was particularly struck by the subtle sense of harmony that he felt in the garden as a whole. The taste of the gardener was impeccable. There was not a single flaw to be found. The daimyo complimented the master of the manor on having achieved this level of refinement in his garden but received this answer: "My lord, I have no merit whatever in this matter. My wife is the one responsible for the garden."

So the daimyo gave his compliments to the wife and had the pleasure of conversing with her on the principles of gardening: the arrangement of flower beds, the sense of rhythm in the spacing of things, the balance between full and empty, the symbolism of the various elements. In sum, they discussed just about everything related to the laws of this very delicate art.

At the time of his departure, the lord bid farewell to his hosts and asked permission to cut a cherrytree branch to decorate his palanquin. The husband gave his assent and escorted his liege-lord to a cherry tree in flower, but his wife came running up to them. Placing herself between the lord and the cherry tree, she said:

"Please, lord, I beg you, don't cut that branch!"

"And why not!?" he said. His expression was black; he was visibly furious.

Everyone was aghast. What an insult! The wife's refusal was unimaginable, her offense unpardonable! The air suddenly became

impossible to breathe. The tension was unbearable. A sense of dread came over the vassal. He already saw himself disgraced and obliged to perform seppuku.

But the wife at last broke the silence and uttered this beautiful flower of a poem:

If you take away
The branch from the cherry tree
Then where will the nightingale
Perch to sing
When springtime comes again?

With a smile, the daimyo turned away from the tree. A fragrant breeze came and refreshed the garden. The encounter was over. The wife of the samurai had reprimanded her lord. But good prince that he was, he left the manor reciting her verses.

The following year when spring came, the lord had a gift sent to the mistress of the garden. It was a *kakemono* (hanging picture scroll) on which a famous artist had painted a cherry branch in flower and calligraphed her poem.

10 | In the School of the Gentleman Bandit

In the middle of a moon-pale night, a line of darkly clad men was walking along the bank of the Yahagi River in the province of Owari. The line was starting across the narrow Okazaki bridge, when their leader froze stock-still. The group stopped behind him like a single man. Across the planks of the bridge, an adolescent lay sleeping, clothed in rags, his beggar's bundle as a pillow. The samurai prodded the boy with his foot to wake him up.

"Get out of the way and let us by!"

Squinting his small eyes and rubbing his frowning face, the boy sat up but stayed put.

"Are you deaf, urchin? Get a move on, we're in a hurry!"

The youth reluctantly complied, crawling to the side of the bridge on his knees and dragging his bundle behind him. Hardly had the last of the band past him by when he jumped to his feet and ran after them, shouting, "What kind of manners are those? Waking a person up and bullying him around without so much as a "pardon me"! You pretend to be lords of high degree, but you behave like a bunch of lowlife bandits!"

The band turned on its heels and one of them had already raised his lance and was about to punish the young idiot who had dared to insult a group of samurai. The leader raised his arm to stop his man and proclaimed loudly, as though speaking to whomever might be listening, "You all, have you ever seen such a lively lad?! He's certainly no lily-liver. It takes a lot of guts to talk to us like that!"

He walked over to the boy, who could not have been much more than twelve years old and was scrawny and unsightly as a chimpanzee.

"Would the gracious gentleman who speaks such fair words kindly pardon us for having disturbed him! I like you. You're a bold lad. You might useful to us. What can you do?"

"I know a lot about a lot of things."

"What, for example?"

“I’ve traveled a lot, plied dozens of trades. I worked on my parents’ farm, then I was apprenticed to a blacksmith, then a potter, then a peddler—and I’m skipping some, some of the better ones. I even know how to read, because at one time I was a novice monk.”

“Well, hey, how about that!? You don’t stay in one place, do you?”

“That’s a fact. I learn fast and then I get bored fast.”

“And what are you up to now?”

“I’m a traveling peddler.”

“Wouldn’t you like to learn to do something else?”

“Why not? It’s my dream to work for a samurai.”

“Ah, well, then,” the warrior replied merrily, “you happened into the right situation. We are ronin, but only by day. At night we carry on another trade to keep food in the pots of the poor and reestablish a little bit of justice in this floating world.” Gales of laughter from the men resounded over the bridge. They were accompanied by the clapping of the waves of the river, which sounded just like applause.

“I deduced that from the outfits you all are wearing. Apprentice thief? Why not?”

“But I’m warning you, my lad, you have to pick up the trade fast. There’s no room for mistakes. So what is your name?”

“Hiyoshi.”

“Well, listen to me closely, Hiyoshi-san, I’ll take you on probation, and you’ll start tonight. Being a traveling peddler, you must surely have spotted a rich household or two in this area.”

The boy scratched his head, then replied, “Follow me.”

The teenager guided the five warriors to a nearby mansion.

Since the courtyard wall was rather high, they began checking out the gate. Just as they were about to force it open with a bar, Hiyoshi whispered, “Hold on. That will make a lot of noise. I saw a persimmon tree with a branch that hangs over the wall. I’ll climb in over that and let you in from the inside.”

The leader signaled his agreement. The youth, nimble as a monkey, climbed the tree, straddled the wall, jumped into the courtyard, and unbolted the gate. The ronin wrapped their heads and faces in black scarves and stole toward the mansion, as silent as shadows under the watchful eye of the moon. They partly opened a shutter and scattered through the house with ninja-like stealth. Just like that, in a few minutes they had laid their pilfering hands on a veritable treasure—ceremonial kimonos, porcelain from China and Korea, jade statuettes, incense burners, kakemonos, and more. One by one the thieves crept out of the mansion back into the night gloating over their success. Young Hiyoshi had gone into the house the last and had made his way to the end of a corridor, attracted by a chest. He was just in the middle of

emptying it when, *crack-crack*, there came a dry clacking noise, no doubt the sound of a shutter being blown shut by the wind. Immediately after that came the loud cry: “Thieves! Thieves!”

In an instant, with a deafening hubbub, the household came alive and people began running around in every direction trying to find the intruders. His retreat being cut off, the naughty boy could think of nothing to do but to hide in the chest! Samurai and servants went scurrying around the whole house and finally went outside to continue their search. Hiyoshi thought to take advantage of this moment to escape, but he couldn’t get out of the chest. The latch had fallen into place. He was trapped! At that very moment he heard the footfalls of a servant woman approaching. In a flash of intuition, he decided to scratch the wood of the chest to imitate the sound of a rat nibbling. The woman, candle in hand, came to investigate. She lifted the chest’s cover and—*whoosh*—Hideyoshi jumped out of it like Jack out of the box. He pushed the servant out of the way and was gone down the corridor. Slightly hurt and terrified, the maligned woman began to shout: “Help! Help! There’s still one here!”

The lad succeeded in reaching the courtyard, but there he was spotted. Shadowy figures flitted back in through the gate from outside the courtyard where they had been searching and chased after him, waving their fearsome weapons. He took off for the back of the courtyard, and as he went around the corner of the house, he saw a well. He picked up a big stone and threw it in. At the same time he let out a yell and continued his flight. His pursuers made a circle around the sides of the well, sure that the thief had fallen in the water. By the time they had lowered a lantern into the well and discovered that there was no one in it, the youth, with no one chasing him, was already far away.

He was a very furious young man when he finally joined up with the rest of the band at the rendezvous spot. No sooner had he arrived when he sharply addressed the leader: “Hey, that was quite the dirty trick you played on me! I was trapped back there and I barely got out with my skin!”

Amused, the ronin replied, “What are you complaining about? You have totally passed your entrance exam. My teaching style is highly effective, is it not? I have initiated you into the art of thievery in a single night!”

“All the same, you abandoned me!”

With an enigmatic smile, the samurai put his hand on his apprentice’s shoulder. and said:

“You’d better think again, lad. It’s true a master is duty-bound to help his students. Now didn’t you find it odd that there was nobody guarding

the gate when you made your escape? Who was it who knocked the sentry unconscious, eh?

"Well, since you are one of ours now, you should know my name. I am Hachisuka Koroku."

Hiyoshi's dream had come true. Now he was in the service of a samurai and had been asked to live in his house. He was a servant during the day, and at night, a thief.

One day Koroku called Hiyoshi to his room. The samurai showed him a short sword, and said, "This is a good wakizashi. See how beautifully the blade is balanced. It was forged by the famous Muramasa. It is high time now for you to have a sword of your own, but you will have to earn it. If you can steal this one from me, it's yours. I'll give you three days. And the samurai put the wakizashi in his belt.

From that moment on, the master wore that sword constantly. He only took it off and laid it down at night, but even at night, he kept it under his pillow. A true samurai sleeps with one eye open; everybody knows this. And a thief, who is always on the alert, sleeps even lighter. At the slightest noise, Koroku would wake up. Hiyoshi realized this and figured it into his plan. At all hours of the night, the youth would get up and walk around his room making the floorboards squeak; or he would pace around outside, making the gravel crunch. Then he would go back to bed.

Just before the dawn of the fourth day, his strategy paid off. He went into the samurai's room and was easily able to slide the sword out from under his pillow. The samurai was exhausted from having been kept awake for three nights. His snoring had masked the sound of his wily apprentice's footsteps. He was totally astonished to wake up in the morning and find the sword gone.

He called for Hiyoshi, who came to his room with the sword in his belt. The samurai congratulated him and said, "No one has ever been able to put anything over on me in my sleep. Without a doubt, my boy, you are an exceptional disciple. I am sure you will go far. From the moment I met you, I knew that you had a great destiny before you."

And in truth, these were prophetic words. The boy, who for a long time was known as Monkey Servant, did indeed have one of the most extraordinary destinies of anyone in the history of the Land of the Rising Sun. Though he was the son of a poor farmer, he was able to climb all the rungs of the Japanese hierarchy. Starting from the level of a traveling peddler and a thief, thanks to his apprenticeship with the ronin thief, he was able to enter the service of a master of the martial arts. He rose to become sandal-bearer to the great lord Oda Nobunaga and finally became his general. When his liege-lord was assassinated, Hiyoshi avenged him and then continued his work. In time he became

the *taiko*, the regent Hideyoshi, the great reunifier of Japan who at last brought peace to the country. He alone succeeded in putting an end to the one hundred and fifty years of civil war of the Sengoku period.

Hideyoshi never forgot the lessons he learned in the school of the gentleman bandit and never lost his sense of gratitude toward the warrior who led it. He made the ronin chief one of his lieutenants and his son the daimyo of the province of Awa.

11 The Second Arrow

A DAIMYO had just received a new suit of armor that he had commissioned from a highly reputed master artisan. It was a true masterpiece and had cost a fortune in gold. Wanting to test it, the daimyo summoned his best archer. The power of the asymmetric samurai bow is such that a shot at point blank range or from a very tightly strung bow will unfailingly pierce armor. It was therefore agreed to use a bow of medium strength and to shoot from a distance of one hundred and twenty paces.

The fully drawn bow released with a dry clacking sound. The bamboo arrow split the air with the piercing screech of the raptor whose feathers served as its fletching. Flying in a slight arc, the arrow plunged right into the breast of the cuirass. The samurai witnessing the scene shook their heads with admiration—such accuracy at such a distance! The arrow had struck into the leaves of lacquered metal with a metallic *clink* and a spray of sparks. But examination of the armor revealed that it had not gone all the way through. There was only a minimal dent at the place of impact.

Reassured, the lord praised the armorer and had the precious masterpiece carried into his apartments.

A week later, the master of the bow who had shot the test arrow asked the daimyo's permission to try the test again.

"What are you trying to prove now?" asked the daimyo. "Do you think you can do better under the same conditions?"

"Perhaps, my lord. Give me a chance to redeem my reputation. It has come to my ears that there are those within these walls who are mocking me and amusing themselves at my expense. They are saying that I've lost my touch."

The lord, with a sardonic smile, gave a further twist to the knife. "It is true that you somewhat disappointed me by losing that duel with the armorer, so I will give you permission for another try. But my

expectations of you are not very high."

With a similar arrow and from the exact same distance, the second trial was carried out. This time the impact on the target had a different sound. The arrow completely pierced the cuirass. The lord asked his master bowman how he had accomplished this feat.

"Everything is a question of *kiai*," the bowman replied. "The first time I shot like an ordinary archer. I was content just to take aim at the armor. It seemed to me that if I shot that way you could feel confident of being invincible on the field of battle, which is one of the keys to victory. The second time I aimed beyond the target. Now that I have shot that way, you know for sure that if you are struck by the arrow of a true master archer, you won't have a chance!"

One must always aim farther,
Beyond the target.
Our breath, our mind
Flies with the arrow.
At the moment it leaves the bow,
Life begins.

—from the oral tradition of kyudo

12 The Strategy of the Gods

During the uncertain times of the Sengoku period, the Japanese Age of the Warring Kingdoms, an army was on the march. At its head was a young lord. The veterans, his father's generals, were whispering behind their beards that this move was pure folly. They had barely four thousand soldiers. They were about to go up against an army of more than twenty thousand men. That was five against one! What could this twenty-six-year-old, still wet behind the ears, have in mind—an honor suicide of the whole clan? It was true that the enemy had invaded their province of Owari on the pretext of lending their strong arm to the weakened shogun. But there was no one who did not know that their true purpose was to take his place.

The enemy's name was Imagawa Yoshimoto. He was the new strongman of the empire. He was called Blacktooth because this elegant aristocrat of high pedigree dyed his teeth black like the decadent aristocrats of Kyoto in former times. Allying himself with Takeda Shingen, Imagawa had taken control of three provinces and amassed the largest army that had been seen for many a year under the sky of Rising Sun.

In the Owari camp, the samurai were prepared to do their duty, but their heart was not in it. Their young lord, in spite of some feats of arms, incredible tenacity, and a diabolical skill in consolidating his power, had still not succeeded in winning them over. He had even alienated a part of the clan. His eccentric conduct and his explosive and unpredictable temperament had long since merited him the sobriquet, the Madman of Owari. This unhinged quality of his had even caused him to go so far as to commit sacrilege at his father's funeral. He had overturned his forebear's ashes on the family shrine and reproached him for having left his son at such a young age with the difficult task of succeeding him. This caused the youth's old tutor to commit suicide to express his profound disapproval. It was said that this dramatic act on

the part of his tutor had upset the young man and brought about a change in him. But still lately he had continued in his crazy ways by excessively favoring his sandal bearer, whom he called Monkey Servant, who was the son of a low-class farmer and a former traveling peddler. First the Madman named this Monkey Servant master of his stables, then he put him in charge of reconstructing his castle. After that he appointed him captain of a brigade of *ashigaru*, the very unreliable foot soldiers of this period.

Decidedly, for many of the samurai, it was a mentally unbalanced Owari daimyo who was riding at their head and leading them to the slaughter.

Along the way the lord of Owari stopped at the Atsuta sanctuary to supplicate the gods to grant him victory. Upon leaving the temple, he took a coin from his belt and announced to his general staff, “I am going to flip this coin for the destiny of our clan. I am putting myself in the hands of the gods. Heads, victory; tails, defeat. Heads, we attack; tails, we will carry out a tactical withdrawal and play the passive-resistance card.”

Raising their eyes to the heavens, the generals prayed for retreat. When the coin fell to the ground, everyone bent down to see what the divine response had been. It was heads. The gods had spoken. The daimyo picked up the coin with a smile and put it back in his belt. The news of the prediction spread through the camp like wildfire and lifted the morale of the troops out of the depths.

After having listened to the reports of the scouts, the young lord of Owari gave his final instructions, at last revealing his plan, which was as dangerous as it was bold. At dusk, a handful of his samurai took up position on a hill. There they planted a veritable forest of banners in the ground and lit a large numbers of fires, giving the impression that the main body of the Owari army was camped on that hill. In actual fact the main Owari army was moving toward the Dengakuhazama gorge, where the enemy army had spent the night.

Imagawa’s immense column was spread over the entire narrow valley. Up to this point, it had encountered almost no resistance. Taking two castles along the way had hardly slowed it down. The present campaign, it believed, was no more than a child’s game, a picnic in the country. Moreover, who was there who would dare to bar their way! That night, they were really not at all on the alert. They were already savoring in advance the pleasure of their triumphal march on the capital. Sake flowed in large quantities, and courtesans had even been invited to sing and dance.

The warriors’ repose was troubled just before dawn by a heavy rain. A storm had broken out. Taking advantage of providential rivulets of

rainwater, rolling thunder, and the low visibility, the small Owari army was able to advance to within a few meters of the enemy camp without being noticed. Soon clouds of their arrows darkened the sky even further, and the humming of their sharp missiles was added to the sound of the rain.

The surprise was total. When the alarm finally sounded, the Imagawa samurai barely had the time to don their armor, much less to devise a battle plan, for their ranks had already been broken by the enemy cavalry. The chaos was indescribable. In just a few minutes, the attackers reached the center of the camp. Powerful Lord Imagawa, in the midst of his decimated personal guard, was desperately looking for a way to escape. He succeeded in killing one attacker, but then was overtaken by an unknown Owari samurai who cut off his head. There could be no doubt that the leader of the invading army was dead—his head with its black-lacquered teeth was exhibited to all! This turn of events completely demoralized his army. His generals decided to sound the retreat.

The victory had been as unforeseen as it was daring, a perfect reflection of the temperament of the young military genius who had brought it about. Oda Nobunaga, for that was his name, galloped all the way to Kyoto. His name was soon on the lips of all the inhabitants of the Land of the Rising Sun. Could this be the Madman of Owari who had left it to the gods to put an end to a hundred and fifty years of civil war?! The wind of the gods blew where he wanted it to. He was the first reunifier of the country and the stepping-stone for his sandal-bearer, Hideyoshi, who carried his work to completion. The two of them paved the way for the two centuries of peace that reigned during the Tokugawa period.

No one had been afraid of the madcap young lord who seemed to be leading his clan to destruction. When the tree already has worms, people thought, then it is easy to cut down. Some people say that Nobunaga exaggerated the deranged side of his personality in order to make people drop their guard. It was this display of incompetence, they say, that kept him safe and avoided his being assassinated by a ninja. One cannot help but think of a classic principle in Chinese strategy that can be summarized in two lines:

> Play the idiot without being crazy,
> Pretend to be drunk without losing your balance.

After his lightning victory at Dengakuhazama, Oda Nobunaga was congratulated by his generals. The oral tradition tells us that one of them went so far as to offer this opinion: “In the end you were right to put yourself in the hands of the gods. Our fate is in their hands. It is

impossible to force destiny."

"Are you so sure?" the young strategist is said to have replied.

And with a sly smile he took the famous coin out of his belt. It was a trick coin—it had two heads.

13 The Daimyo and His Bodyguard

A DAIMYO, lord of the province of Mito, took a walk for his pleasure each day in the garden of his castle. He loved to amble about its lanes, admire the flowers that had just unbuttoned their robes, breathe their perfume, listen to the psalmody of the foliage, of the insects, of the brook, or let himself be surprised by the flight or the song of a bird. For him it was a ritual, a privileged moment for meditation, far from the noise and vanity of this impermanent world.

All the same, the daimyo was never totally alone during his solitary promenade. His *heiosha*, his bodyguard, followed him like his shadow. Even if the bodyguard was silent as a cat and discreetly kept his distance, the lord knew that he never failed to keep watch. As a game, the daimyo sometimes changed the rhythm of his gait, accelerated a little, attempted to escape the vigilance of his bodyguard at a turning in the path—but in vain. The samurai, his mind always alert, never let himself be taken by surprise. If the lord quickened his pace and tried to vanish, the bodyguard immediately quickened his own step and instinctively followed his master's trace and kept him in sight. He knew that the least lapse in his attention might prove fatal, the least failure in his vigilance might be irreparable. In these troubled times, a ninja, one of those hired killers possessed of formidable weapons and techniques, might attack at any moment.

Occasionally, the daimyo would give his heiosha the signal to approach. He would then engage him in conversation on the specific qualities of the various schools of *kenjutsu* or perhaps the secrets of swordsmanship. The lord was a fine swordsman himself and he appreciated the immense knowledge of his bodyguard on the subject. Had the bodyguard not for several years been a *shugyosha*, a pilgrim warrior who travels from master to master to study swordsmanship under them, and who in order to enter their schools, must win the approval of their best disciples? The lord had only trusted him with his

personal protection because he was an unrivaled fighter, a marvelously accomplished master of all weapons and all styles of hand-to-hand combat. The lord had seen him in action in the training ground as well as on the battlefield. Few samurai in the clan could stand up against him.

It was in the daimyo's mind that one day his heiosha could replace his master of arms, who had reached an advanced age and would soon have to retire. But the daimyo felt a lingering uncertainty. Did the bodyguard, as experienced as he was, possess a high enough level of warriorship for such a position? Did he really have all the necessary inner qualities, going beyond mere technique, to teach the very essence of *bushido*, the Way of the Samurai?

One day the lord asked him, "What is it, in your opinion, that makes a warrior a true master of the sword?"

"His *fudoshin*."

"How would you define that?"

"A state of extreme vigilance in which the mind does not allow itself to be possessed by any thought or any emotion. Nothing distracts the warrior, so he cannot be taken by surprise. In an instant he will respond to whatever the situation requires."

Hardly had the bodyguard finished speaking these words when, as they were crossing a small bridge that had no railing and had been worn smooth and slippery by the weather, his daimyo gave him a hard push. The bodyguard was able to maintain his balance for a moment, but finally amid a great rustling of silk, he went tumbling into the pond among the beautifully arrayed lotuses.

"Is that your fudoshin?!" the master called down to him mockingly. He then disappeared around a screen of bamboos, leaving the samurai splashing about in the pond.

Everything now seemed clear. The heiosha did not have the inner qualities of a true master of arms. The news of the incident at the bridge was spread about by a few witnesses, and soon the other warriors were sharing with each other their doubts concerning the the bodyguard's worthiness.

Three days later, before a gathering of his astonished samurai, the daimyo appointed his heiosha the first assistant to the master of arms. In this way, he was in effect naming him as the master of arms' future replacement. In order to put an end to the dubious looks of his peers that the bodyguard had been patiently enduring and in order to explain his decision, the lord recounted what he had learned the evening after the incident at the bridge.

"When I removed my kimono, I found a *kozuka* in the inside fold of my left sleeve. I recognized it because it is the one that goes with the

katana I earlier gave my heiosha as a gift. In a flash I understood that he had had the time to take it out of its sheath and place it in my sleeve before he fell! My heiosha was letting me know that he had not been so much taken by surprise as it seemed. And he did not fail in his duty as a samurai: he preferred losing face to allowing his master to fall into the muddy water of the pond!”

14 The Revenge of the Samurai Wife

In a secluded room at the end of a corridor in Iwakura Castle in Owari Province, a man and a woman were conversing in low voices, their mutterings masked by the croaking of the frogs in the moat. He was one of the oldest vassals of the master of the castle, Lord Oda Nobuyuki. He was a man about fifty, a much-feared warrior, with a fierce, haughty, and aggressive temperament who was the terror of his subordinates. She was the duenna of the ladies-in-waiting to the chatelaine—a harsh, jealous, grasping woman with a viper's tongue who tyrannized those under her supervision. True birds of ill omen, these two conspired together, spreading their poison and attemptinng to assuage their thirst for power. His name was Sakuma Shichiroyemon and hers, Tora no Kata.

"You are suggesting that our lord is planning to make that inexperienced lout Hachiya his number-one counselor. That's incredible!" he said.

"That's what I thought I heard this morning," she replied. "And that's not everything. It's also being bruited about that he intends to marry him to that featherbrain Katsuno who is our mistress's favorite. I really don't know what she sees in that girl!"

But her interlocutor found the young beauty she was referring to totally to his taste. He had been a widower for a while and had wooed her assiduously in secret without success.

"That's just too much!" he exploded. "I know just what I have to do. As for you, Lady Tora, try to get Katsuno disgraced so I can pluck that flower for myself. You will be well rewarded for it. In the meantime, here's something for your information."

And he handed her a small purse before disappearing with muted step down the corridor.

The following day as the ladies-in-waiting were gossiping in the garden, the old duenna burst into their midst like an enraged dog into a

flock of sheep.

"Come, come, ladies," she barked, "enough blabbing! It's time to get back to work. Katsunosan, did you remember to feed the bird Takane?"

"Not yet, Lady Tora."

"Come on, then, get a move on! I don't hear him singing. He must be starving!"

The young woman ran to get some birdseed and returned to the garden. She stopped under a plum tree in flower from which a large gilded cage was hanging. As she was trying to unhook the cage so she could feed the bird inside, the ring from which it was suspended broke and the cage fell. When it hit the ground, its door sprung open, and the bird flew away.

"You bungling fool! What have you done!" cried the duenna. "You have let this priceless treasure given to our lord by the shogun escape. What an unforgivable blunder!" And the old woman dragged Katsuno behind her to go receive her punishment. Lord Oda Nobuyuki received her surrounded by his council of vassals.

"Do you realize what a stupid thing you've done!?" he shouted at her in his fury. "Suppose the shogun should visit me and ask to see the bird! Such negligence calls for a punishment that will be an example to all!"

Craftily, Shichiroyemon seized the moment and said, "That is true, Sire, but do not be too severe. She has been the victim of her absentmindedness. Let it be enough to banish her from your suite for a time. Let me take charge of her. I will shut her up in my house and teach her to be more mindful."

But now young Hachiya spoke up.

"Sire, on this anniversary day of the death of your father, show yourself to be as generous as Emperor Takahura was with his gardeners."

"Be so kind as to refresh my memory concerning that incident."

"One morning in winter, the gardeners cut a few branches from a magnificent old maple tree to warm their sake with. It being the case that the emperor was particularly fond of that tree, a steward had the guilty parties arrested and informed His Majesty. The latter, instead of becoming angry, recited these verses by the Chinese poet Bai Juyi:

> Passing through the woods
> For a time we paused.
> Maple leaves we gathered there
> And burned them to warm our wine.

"For having reminded me of this admirable poem, the kindly emperor declared, 'I pardon these men.' Following his example, Sire, be indulgent. Do not follow in the footsteps of the Heike, whose harshness

caused them to be hated and finally caused their downfall."

Furious, Shichiroyemon was unable to hide his exasperation and cried out, "His honor the orator in displaying his erudition has confused our minds. Every misdeed must be punished, otherwise the doorway to anarchy will be thrown wide open."

"What misdeed are you talking about?" retorted Hachiya. "This was more of an accident. And why should we not tell everyone, Sire, that it was your idea to have the bird liberated so it would ascend into the heavens and its song would rejoice the heart of your late father?! That would be an acceptable reason should this matter come to the ears of the shogun. He could not fault you for your filial piety."

"Excellent, my dear Hachiya," said the emperor. "Without a doubt you always have good advice to offer. Moreover, that is exactly why I am appointing you first counselor. And in view of the fact that you show so much concern for Miss Katsuno, who according to my wife, finds you attractive, I hereby proclaim your nuptials, to take place this very evening."

The following day, the new first counselor was found assassinated. The murder weapon, a knife, was left sticking in the corpse as a kind of signature. Lord Oda Nobuyuki recognized it. It was the dagger he had given as a gift to Shichiroyemon, a marvelous blade forged by the famous Masamune. At once he sent his samurai to have Shichiroyemon arrested, but the felon was not to be found. It was learned not long after that he had entered the service of Oda Nobunaga, the head of the clan. He had told his new lord that his brother Nobuyuki had been plotting against Nobunaga and had given Nobunaga a list of the names of his fellow conspirators. As a result, war was imminent. Having a premonition that this affair would turn out badly for her protector, the unfortunate Katsuno asked for permission to depart on a pilgrimage to pray for the soul of her fiancé. She also asked to be given the murder weapon, of which she wished to make an offering at a temple.

Katsuno's journey took her to the castle at Inabayama, the dwelling of Lord Saito Dosan, an ally of Oda Nobunaga. She managed to gain employment at the castle by falsifying her identity. The story she invented was that she was the daughter of a poor samurai from a distant province whose father had fallen into disgrace. The mistress of the castle took a liking to Katsuno, who became a favorite in her retinue. Thus in a safe place Katsuno patiently bided her time while her former lord was locked in the torment of a fratricidal war for control of the Oda clan.

One day Katsuno suggested to her mistress that for the spring festival she should organize a *yobusame* contest, an archery competition on horseback, in memory of her father who had been a champion at this spectacular martial art. The chatelaine of Inabayama thought this was

an excellent idea and her favorite, Katsuno, saw to it that Sakuma Shichiroyemon, who excelled in this art, was invited.

The day of the tourney, beautiful Katsuno was seated beside her mistress in the seats of honor. She was resplendent in the finery of a lady in waiting. No one could have guessed that she had the Masamune dagger concealed in her sleeve. One by one, the horse-mounted archers came to salute the local lord and his retinue. Each cried his name aloud before setting off at a gallop to shoot his arrows at the targets. When the somber Shichiroyemon presented himself, splendid in his ceremonial kimono, decorated with nightingales on flowering cherry branches, Katsuno leapt at him, crying the name of Hachiman, the god of war. She was the daughter of a samurai, who had been trained in the use of arms since childhood. She grasped the cavalier's sleeve with one hand and raised the dagger in the other.

"For the memory of my fiancé, whom you foully murdered!" she shouted.

Everyone was astonished at this unexpected attack, Shichiroyemon most of all. The dagger pierced his thigh. He fell from the saddle and onto the ground at the feet of his horse, whose snow-white caparison was now calligraphed in his blood. The tigress struck a second time, this time fatally.

"Tsuda Hachiya is avenged!" she shouted. "May his soul rest in peace!"

She was about to turn the knife on herself, but two samurai quickly disarmed her and dragged her before the lord of Inabayama. Divided between admiration and indignation at having been taken advantage of, the lord ordered her held in confinement to give him time to reflect.

The festival was over. The guests returned to their respective homes, carrying with them the story of the young woman's courageous vengeance.

A few days later, the chatelaine visited her favorite to tell her, "My husband is in an impossible situation. You acted according to the laws of bushido, but you betrayed his trust. His guests were under his protection."

"I understand that, and I am ready to die."

"The family of your victim, with the support of Oda Nobunaga, are demanding redress, but the affair is complicated. A vassal of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who witnessed the scene, has asked for your hand and has his lord's approval."

"A marriage is out of the question. I will remain faithful to my fiancé!"

"Be reasonable, I beg you. We can't offend both of these powerful lords. And think of your lineage. Aren't you an only daughter? It is your

duty to live and continue your bloodline to carry on the worship of your ancestors. The young man who has asked for your hand is a charming one. You were made for each other. We have arranged for your escape. A palanquin with an escort is waiting for you."

Katsuno gave in, and it was not long before she was married.

Not too many months passed before the young woman began to enjoy her new life. She lived in harmony with her husband and in time gave birth to a son. But the family of the notorious Shichiroyemon continued to look for her and at last they found her. Lord Oda Nobunaga officially enjoined her protector, Tokugawa Ieyasu, to hand over this woman who had murdered his vassal. The unadorned response from Tokugawa was that it went against all honor to betray someone under one's protection, to wish to avenge a contemptible assassin, and to fail to offer every support to a true heroine, whose courage was an example to the entire nation. This reply enraged the daimyo of Owari. The relations between the two allies became distant and cold. Two ninja were sent to assassinate Katsuno. They were caught and killed in time. But now it was Tokugawa Ieyasu whose ire was aroused. The communications between the two clan chiefs turned dark and threatening. War was imminent.

Wishing to avoid being the cause of the bloody conflict that was brewing, the young woman composed letters of thanks to her protectors and her husband. After having sung a last lullaby to her child, she withdrew to a secluded room and, using the Masamune dagger, departed from the dream of this floating world.

15 The Invisible Target

THREE YOUNG RONIN decided to share their travels for a time. They were joining forces to cross the Okuchuchibu mountains in order to reach the Kanto plain on the other side. In those uncertain times and in those bandit-infested mountains, it was a good idea to have some companions to help fend off whatever dangers might be lurking.

The three young samurai without a liege-lord had embarked on their *musha shugyo*, the quest of the wandering warrior. Their aim was to perfect their skill and discipline by going from school to school. They hoped by engaging in as many (possibly mortal) duels as the could, they might acquire a reputation impressive enough to allow them to enter the service of a daimyo or open their own dojo. Each one of the three ronin had his own specialty. For one it was the sword, for another the lance, and for the third the bow.

As they were coming to Jumonji Pass, they became lost in a seemingly endless fog. At last in the evening, exhausted, they took refuge in an old, ruined temple. In the middle of the night, one of the samurai woke his companions. A kind of blood-curdling cackle could be heard in the air. The Japanese have many legends about *yokai* who haunt deserted places: phantoms, demons, wild mountain ogresses, fox bitches—the list goes on and on.

The moon was full but the mist was so thick that it was impossible to see anything at all, let alone whatever it was that was making that sound. Two of the samurai were extremely frightened. The mist was like a screen on which the magic lantern of the moon was projecting Chinese shadows of the foliage, creating a phantasmagorical scene. Their unbridled imaginations provided the two scared samurai with nightmarish visions of flying heads, huge arms, and phosphorescent phantoms of all kinds. They took up their weapons and began swinging them around in such a berserk and aimless fashion that they were in danger of injuring each other. These would-be tough warriors, under the

influence of superstitious fears brought on by ancestral beliefs instilled in them in their childhood, had completely lost themselves in panic. In spite of their slicing and slashing weapons and their shouts, the sinister laughing did not cease echoing about the valley. They begged their companion to start shooting his bow, arguing that his was the weapon used in Shinto rituals to exorcise evil spirits in emulation of Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun who dispelled shadows with her solar arrows.

Angered by their hysteria, the archer ordered them to calm down, and in a state of half sleep he bent his bow. He shot in the direction that he judged intuitively to be that from which the cackling sound was coming. A single arrow was all that was needed to still the demonic laughter. The exorcism by means of the bow had succeeded.

As dawn broke, the last shrouds of fog were dispelled by the first rays of the sun. The three ronin decided to try to find where the arrow had landed. Perhaps there they would find the carcass of a kitsune (a spirit fox) or the like. What a big surprise to find the arrow transfixing two bamboos. It was those two slender trees, rubbing against each other at the whim of the wind, that had produced that monstrous laughter. The archer had struck the bull's eye at fifty paces in an impenetrable fog, aiming only by ear! This was truly an incredible feat.

"You are a master of the bow. You will be able to open your own school!" one of the samurai who had been frightened told him.

"You possess the secret of the Supreme Shot that some senseis talk about," said the other.

Pulling out his arrow, the archer replied, "Enough, enough. It was nothing but luck. I'll prove it to you."

Back again in the old temple, the archer, with his eyes open, shot in the direction of the two bamboos that had been dancing in the wind. It was not until the fifth shot that he was able to immobilize them again. Then he tried again with his eyes closed. He shot until he had emptied his quiver—with no success. All that only confirmed the sensation he had had the night before. In the semiconscious state in which he had shot, his spirit had been free of all mental intention and thus in harmony with the universe. In that state he had allowed the bamboo in his arrow to become one with the bamboo of the trees. His arrow had been let fly with the innocence of the maple leaf falling from its twig like a ripe fruit in the autumn.

The archer had experienced the shot of pure emptiness. He knew that he would have to shoot thousands of arrows before experiencing it again. Such is the Law of the Way of the Bow, and so it is with technique in general.

In the red twilight the child will be born

From the curving womb that catches the eye.
Like a bird taking flight, the shining arrow
Will embark, casting its reflections
Leaving something inexplicable in its wake.

In the evening light nothing moves, nothing claims victory.
In the numbing heat, the question is: what is chance?
Far away the fateful star emanates, and like a living vibration,
A shaft with no age, the sister of speed,
Splits the air like a cutlass.

—Jacques Normand, based on the Precepts of the Bow

16 | Hideyoshi's Eighth Thought

When Hanabusa Sukebei arrived, at nightfall, within sight of Odawara Castle, he did not believe his eyes. In his long career as a samurai, he had never seen such a vast ocean of tents. The chateau was surrounded by a huge city of canvas. A forest of banners displayed the blazons of at least half the clans of Japan. Never had such an army been assembled for a siege. There must have been no less than one hundred and fifty thousand men. It seemed that the regent Hideyoshi wanted to finish off the Go-Hojo with the least possible delay. It was one of the last clans that still resisted him and that prevented him from entirely reunifying the empire. Sukebei had come with his brigade from his distant province at his lord's summons to reinforce this vast army.

The veteran had further surprises in store for him. As he penetrated deeper into the alleyways of the tent city, he saw unimaginable things, completely beyond his comprehension. Samurai were strolling about with their wives or concubines. There were fire-eaters, fortune-tellers, storytellers, acrobats—all manner of entertainers. There was also lots of music. Orchestras of kotos and shamisens accompanied the singing and lascivious dancing of courtesans in colored silk raiment and sparkling jewelry. You would have thought you were in the quarter of willows and flowers. It was like a scene from an immense brothel.

As he was passing near the area of the camp set aside for the general staff, the austere Hanabusa Sukebei, a fervent devotee of military discipline, could not restrain himself from exclaiming, "This is unbelievable. Shame! Shame! What decadence! The country must have fallen to an incredibly low level for a scene like this to happen!"

A sentry, after having laughed in his face, chanted a little poem:

In his old pond
The frog croaks.
It pains our ears,

But just imagine:
He thinks he's knocking down the stars!

Beside himself, the graying vassal began to harangue the sentry.

"Just the result you might expect from all this lack of discipline! Elders are no longer respected. Drunken samurai stand guard. I wonder who the degenerate commander is who allows such disarray in his camp!? And as for you, I am awaiting your apology. If I don't hear it, I'll wash away your insult with your blood!"

"Apologies from me? You're the one who better apologize since you have just insulted the regent Hideyoshi!"

Sukebei had never imagined that it could have been Hideyoshi himself who had been supervising the siege for the last two months. And that it could have been he who tolerated such a lack of discipline! Of course he had heard that Hideyoshi was eccentric, but to this degree?

An officer who had witnessed this scene demanded to know the name of the new arrival and that of his liege-lord. Then he put Sukebei under arrest and made a report on the incident.

When Taiko Hideyoshi heard that some obscure country squire had dared to insult him in this way, he reddened with rage and ordered with an ape-like grimace that the squire's daimyo be brought before him. Uesugi Kagekatsu, one of his generals, presented himself sheepishly before the Regent and greeted him, forehead to the ground.

"One of your vassals crudely insulted me in public. This is unacceptable! Make an example of him and have him crucified upside down like a common thief!"

Without raising his eyes for fear of encountering the irate glare of the fearsome Regent, and unable to utter a single word of apology, Kagekatsu departed, death in his soul, to carry out his grim task. He was very fond of this loyal vassal, limited in his views and gruff in his speech though he might be. Nevertheless, he was relieved that he himself had gotten off so lightly. As he was thinking like this, an aide-de-camp caught up with him and said, "Taiko-Sama summons you to return."

Kagekatsu did an about-face, expecting this time he was going to get the dressing-down he had escaped before.

"I spoke too hastily just now under the influence of anger," the Regent told him. "I've thought further about the matter. In the end, it's too disgraceful for a samurai to die in this manner. Let it be enough for you to behead him and exhibit his head on a stake!" Just as Kagekatsu was reluctantly about to swing his blade to execute this sentence, struggling to suppress his regret and pain so he would not spoil his stroke, he heard "Stop! His Highness the Regent wants to see you right away!"

Back once more in the Taiko's tent, he heard these words: "I have

once again reflected on this matter. It was really nothing more than an insult. It's inappropriate for him to die like a criminal. Grant him an honorable death. Let him commit seppuku!"

"Sire, I give you many thanks on his behalf. You are too good," the daimyo murmured in the fawning tones of a courtier.

During the ritual of seppuku, as the unfortunate Sukebei was about to plunge his dagger into the *hara tanden*, a spot three finger's breadth below the navel, a page arrived and interrupted the ceremony.

The daimyo was summoned before the Regent a fourth time. Lord Kagekatsu was relieved. Perhaps Hideyoshi would show his merciful side, as he often did. And in fact, the Regent sighed and said, "So. Up until now I have been motivated by anger. And your vassal also lost his temper. Was he drunk?"

"No, my lord, he never drinks when he is on duty. He is an exemplary samurai, a veritable paragon of discipline."

"Very well then, let us content ourselves with condemning him to the sad fate of a ronin. Let his fief be confiscated along with all his possessions, and let him be banished! And post notices of my decision around the camp so that everyone will know what fate is in store for those who dare to be insolent!"

Kagekatsu was in the midst of executing the calligraphy of the sentence when he was interrupted by a messenger who brought yet a fifth summons.

"After careful reflection," the Taiko, doubtless a very unpredictable man, declared, "I have changed my mind once again. I put myself in the place of your country samurai and I found some attenuating circumstances in the case. Based on what I have understood, the man is a veteran, trained in the old school of bushido. He knows nothing of the subtleties of strategy or the fine points of politics. How alarmed he must have been when he arrived in our camp! He couldn't imagine for one second that the apparent disorder that reigns here is part of my plan to demoralize the enemy under siege. I want to get them to believe that we have all the time in the world and we are dead set on maintaining the siege for months and months. In reality, just the opposite is the case. Their castle is practically impregnable with its broad moats, its hundreds of muskets, its tons of ammunition, and the reserves in its possession, which are enough for at least a year. Taking it by main force would lead to a veritable bloodbath, and I am not in a position to keep an army like this in one place for such a long time. Other clans might take advantage of a situation like that and form a coalition to overthrow me. Yes, indeed, it's a sure thing that your samurai understands nothing whatever of psychological warfare. He applies the rules literally, and seeing them violated, he flew off the handle, that's all. I am lifting his

punishment. Explain my strategy to him and ask him to make me a public apology. And let that be the end of it!"

The rustic samurai Sukebei came the following morning to prostrate before the Regent, who was surrounded by his general staff. Instead of abjectly apologizing, he raised his head, dared to meet the piercing gaze of the all-powerful Taiko and declared, "Please be so kind as to pardon me my crudeness. I was unaware that Your Highness was here and even less aware that you were behind the disorder in the camp."

"Fine, fine, good sir, I have understood that."

But the veteran continued his speech before the eyes of the astounded generals.

"Although I am a country bumpkin of limited understanding, incapable of such vast vision as yours, I still insist on expressing my disapproval of this abandonment of discipline. In my humble opinion, it is not suitable for samurai in time of war to let themselves go this way in the pursuit of their pleasures. It is a bad example for the working classes and presenting your enemies with such a pathetic picture only encourages them."

A deafening silence reigned over the assembly. What an insult! And the foolhardy fellow continued.

"I thank you for your generous pardon, but please permit me to present you with a request."

His countenance as impenetrable as a Noh mask, the Regent simply inquired, "What is it?"

"I request that the samurai who insulted me the other night should also present me with his apologies. It is unthinkable that the young should be allowed to criticize their elders in public."

"Granted!" exclaimed Hideyoshi with a loud laugh that instantly unfroze the atmosphere.

Then, turning to General Kagekatsu, who had confined himself up to that point to fixedly regarding the point of his nose, the Taiko said, "You are lucky to have such a vassal in your service. He has real guts, his boldness is unsurpassable. There aren't many men of his kind left."

Staring down the members of his general staff one by one with his raptor's eye, he admonished them: "And now all of you, let that be an example to you! I am surrounded by too many sycophants who haven't the courage to tell me what they think." Turning back to Kagekatsu, he said, "Come to think of it, your vassal really merits a promotion rather than a penalty. What is his rank? What are his revenues?"

"He is an infantry lieutenant, the head of a brigade of three hundred men. He has an estate that yields one hundred *koku*."

"Well, that is too little for a samurai of his mettle. Make him the captain of a regiment of a thousand men and give him five hundred

koku!”

This could have been the end of this incident, but that very evening the unpredictable Taiko summoned the powerful daimyo Uesugi Kagekatsu once again. His glance and his voice full of bitterness, he addressed him:

“I have reflected on this matter once more. Maybe you think I don’t know my own mind. But thought is sometimes slow to chew over the many facets of an event and draw all the juice from it. In the end, your attitude has profoundly disappointed me. Not once did you speak up to try to defend your vassal! The bond of loyalty binds both ways. That is the sacred law of bushido. You acted like a despicable courtier. So here now is a further judgment: I am relieving you of your post in my general staff and I am appointing your vassal in your stead. I need warriors with real toughness and nerve around me. Now go back to your province for a while and meditate on my eighth and final decision!”

17 Trial by Horse

A SWORD MASTER had decided to choose his successor, the person who would lead his school when he was gone. He summoned his three best disciples to meet him outside a stall that held a young stallion. The thoroughbred had not yet been broken, and as soon as it was approached, it showed that it was a very high-strung animal. The sensei gave the following explanation.

"This is the trial I have devised to test your level of attainment. One by one, you will go into the stall and not come out again until you have completely circled the horse."

The moment the first disciple entered the very small enclosure, the wild stallion began to rear, leap, and buck, and it continued to do this without stopping. The samurai, hopping from one foot to the other, feinting to fool the animal, dodging with astonishing speed and a dazzling sense of rhythm, parried all the stallion's kicks and came out of the stall without the slightest bruise. His movements had been like a dance attuned to the energies of his partner.

The second disciple used an entirely different technique. Exhibiting intense concentration, he held his hands in front of him as if they were holding a sword. From this position, he feigned an attack and at the same time emitted a cry that seemed to come from the very depths of his being. Confused , the horse shied to one side and let the samurai pass. Reaching the other side of the stall, the samurai executed the same maneuver, and the thoroughbred, visibly terrified, froze in its tracks and thus allowed the samurai to pass him again.

The third disciple was incredibly relaxed. He moved forward as though he were floating over the ground. An inner smile illuminated his face. The horse did not so much as flinch. It seemed to be entirely indifferent to the presence of this man.

To the first two disciples, the master said, "You have made presentations indicating that you have attained a very high level in the

Way of the Sword. One of you, taking a yin approach, gave an excellent demonstration of the science of dodging. Your attention was flawless, you did not allow yourself to be taken by surprise, and you moved in union with the movement of the enemy. The other, taking a yang approach, was able to throw the horse into confusion through the use of kiai. Projecting outward your inner energy, you dominated the animal."

Then, turning to the third disciple, the master said, "As for you, you were in the state of *mushin*, no-mind. Your being was as calm and transparent as the water of a lake not rippled by the wind. Not the slightest shadow came to darken it. It was not marred by fear or intention. Animals are highly sensitive to our emanations. The horse felt completely at ease with you and calmed down completely. Duality disappeared—there was no ego, no enemy."

And the master gave him the menkyo kaiden, the certificate of the ultimate transmission of the secrets of his school.

18 The Challenge of Flowers for Tea

Taiko Hideyoshi had an immoderate passion for the tea ceremony, a passion that had come to him from his lord, Odu Nobunaga. When his lord died, Hideyoshi took Nobunaga's tea master into his service. This was the famous Se no Rikyu, who left a lasting imprint on this incomparable Way. Hideyoshi was more than a mere patron of this art. He had reached the level of an illumined practitioner and teacher. He was so thoroughly engaged in the practice of tea that at times he went out of his way, and even took a wry pleasure, in putting his great tea master to the test in such a way as to encourage him to keep pushing the limits of his mastery.

One day Hideyoshi invited Rikyu to come and officiate at a ceremony. He gave him a gold cup with a very wide mouth and a flowering plum branch for the *chabana*, the tea-ceremony flower arrangement. Eager to discover how the master would relate to the challenge of combining these elements, he attended the ceremony, already with a slight smile on his lips.

When the tea pavilion was in readiness, the Regent arrived and approached the *tokonoma*, the alcove where, beneath an appropriate scroll, or kakemono, the flower arrangement was placed. The plum branch, partly picked of its flowers, had been laid beside the wide-mouthed golden cup, which had been placed in such a way as to catch a ray of sun. The cup had been filled with water, and in the water floated the pink petals, transfigured by the golden reflections from the cup, and these reflections were in turn cast flame-like onto the calligraphed scroll.

Hideyoshi found the arrangement extremely beautiful, and congratulated Rikyu.

It is said that from this arrangement came the custom of floating petals in a wide-mouthed vase.

When the bowl is served
With the water steeped
In the limitless depths of the mind,
That is the real tea ceremony.

—Toyotomi Hideyoshi

19 The Apparition of the Buddha

A SAMURAI had a childhood friend who had become a *yamabushi*, a mountain ascetic. For some years the friend had been following the *shugendo*, the Way of the Yamabushi, in which he devoted himself to severe ascetic practices—fasts, walks in the dead of night, meditating in freezing-cold waterfalls, and so on. The samurai himself was a lay disciple of Zen. He regularly went to visit his friend in his hermitage, and the two of them would talk by the hour about the similarities and differences of their respective spiritual paths.

One day, when the samurai arrived at the mouth of his friend's cave, he found the yamabushi in an unusual state of excitation. His eyes were shining very brightly, and he gestured emphatically as he spoke.

"You should know that the merciless asceticism to which I have subjected myself has borne fruit. The Buddha finally rewarded me. For the last short while, he has been appearing to me every night, riding on a white elephant."

In response to the skeptical expression of the visitor, the hermit added, "If you don't believe me, stay with me tonight, and you'll see for yourself."

At nightfall, the yamabushi prepared for the ritual used for invoking the Buddha. He climbed a tumbled heap of boulders and placed on its summit a number of bowls overflowing with offerings. Then he came back down and seated himself at the mouth of his cave, facing the rocks. He sounded his conch and chanted mantras to the rhythm of his small drum. His trance lasted until the hour of the cow. And at that point, amid the rays of the moon, the Buddha appeared on his pearl-white mount. The hermit, in ecstasy, called to his friend.

"There he is! Look!"

"Oh, yes, there is your famous Buddha."

"If you see him too, then it's clearly not an illusion."

Suddenly the samurai raised his bow and took aim at the apparition.

The arrow whistled through the air. A cry was heard and the vision vanished like mist in the rising sun.

The yamabushi was beside himself.

“You fool, what have you done? What a sacrilege! You have dared to shoot the Buddha! You are to blame for ruining the result of years of spiritual practice!”

“Listen, my friend, in Zen there is a saying: ‘If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!’ Meditate on that until tomorrow morning, and we will speak again.”

With this, the archer went to sleep and slept the sleep of the just.

At dawn, the two friends climbed the heap of boulders, and at the top they found the corpse of a *tanuki*, its muzzle in the offering bowls. In Japan, old badgers are thought to be spirits endowed with supernatural powers. They can take on all kinds of shapes and appearances. They play pranks on humans, especially if the pranks get people to satisfy their legendary gluttonous appetites.

20 The Return of the Ronin

The Way of the Samurai is nothing other than serving one's lord heart and soul, honoring all one's duties, even the most difficult, and renouncing one's own interests.

—based on *Hakagure: The Book of the Samurai*

Upon his return from a lightning-like campaign on the island of Kyushu where the nine provinces were at last brought under the control of Taiko Hideyoshi, the daimyo Gamo Ujisato celebrated his victory. As the heroic general of the winning army, he had been promoted to the post of governor of Ise Province, with a revenue of three hundred thousand koku. In the course of the victory banquet, he praised his loyal lieutenants for their martial feats and distributed fiefs and other rewards to them. One of the lieutenants, Nishimura Gonshiro, expected to receive a special recompense, since he had saved the life of his lord in battle. Having gone unrewarded in the general distribution and not even having been mentioned, he was outraged. The following day he deserted his post. His master gave orders to search for him, but he could not be found.

Three years later, a ronin in a pitiable state presented himself at the door of the castle of the governor of Ise. He was unrecognizable, emaciated, in rags. In order to have himself announced to Daimyo Gamo Ujisato, he was forced to state his name. The daimyo came down at once to see him.

"Ah, there you are at last, my dear Gonshiro. How I have missed you!"

Prostrating with his face in the dust, the deserter begged abjectly to be pardoned.

"Please forgive me, Sire. I was upset about not having been given any reward for my service, and I acted like a child. I dishonored the code of bushido. Please take me back into your service, even as a humble foot soldier."

Taking him by the shoulder, the lord forced him to rise. As he led him

into his residence, he said, “How thin you’ve become! Your journey was not a profitable one. Were you not able to find another post for yourself?”

“No, the daimyos worthy of service wanted nothing to do with a renegade. Those who were willing to take me on would not come up to your knees. It is better to be the servant of a good master than the vassal of a worthless lord.”

“Your words do you honor. Go change your clothes and come this evening to the reception hall. We will celebrate your return.”

In the course of the banquet, the lord drank to the health of this samurai of his who had returned, saying, “In memory of the good old days, let us wrestle. You were always bold enough to defeat me in the past, but you appear to be weaker now. Maybe this time I’ll finally have a chance.”

While room was being made in the hall and the adversaries were warming up, Gonshiro’s former companions in arms tried to reason with him, whispering in his ear, “Let him win this time. He was generous enough to take you back into his service. Now don’t go ruining the whole thing!” The match began. After a few inconclusive holds, the suspense became intolerable. All at once the samurai threw his lord off balance and sent him tumbling to the tatamis. Stunned, the daimyo took some time getting back to his feet. Everyone was expecting the worst.

Having returned to the place of honor, the lord raised his cup and proclaimed, “Let us drink once more to the health of our dear Gonshiro. Without a doubt, he is still his old self. Earlier on, I wanted to test him by not giving him his reward immediately. The ancients say you should not trust a man who has never fallen—you do not know how he will behave when at last he does fail. Having lost face, he had the strength to come back to me. Instead of flattering me, he had the guts to make me bite the dust. Now today, I know what kind of stuff Gonshiro is made of. I can finally give him his promotion. I therefore hereby name him the lord of Kage Castle, with a revenue of ten thousand koku. Our future remains uncertain, and only a trusted vassal can hold this strategic place on which our security so much depends!”

> If you have not been a ronin seven times, you cannot claim the name of a true samurai. Stumble seven times, but stand up the eighth time once and for all.
>
> —based on *Hakagure: The Book of the Samurai*

21 The Shogun and the Ninja

After his victory at the battle of Sekigahara against the other regents who supported the heir of Hideyoshi, Tokugawa Ieyasu became the new shogun. But the powerful Toyotomi clan and its allies continued their rebellious opposition for fifteen more years. This resulted in a series of skirmishes, sieges, set battles, and precarious truces. Neither of the two sides could gain the upper hand. A perpetual atmosphere of insecurity reigned.

The principal rebel chief was Sanada, who was supported by his ten "heroes" who became figures of legend. Among those was Kakei Juzo, a former ninja who had been made a samurai by Hideyoshi. He was a crack shot and spent his time training squadrons of musketeers, whose deadly fire caused great destruction in the Tokugawa ranks. In response, the shogun hired a certain Tonbe, a highly reputed ninja, to assassinate this Juzo, whose very effective training methods were capable of transmitting to recruits in record time the art of shooting a musket.

The hired killer succeeded in delivering Sanada's "hero" bound hand and foot to Edo Castle. Ieyasu immediately ordered his execution, but Juzo, being a samurai, demanded his right to commit seppuku. The shogun granted this honor due to a warrior. Perhaps he was also somewhat intrigued to learn how a former ninja would conduct himself in committing seppuku.

Kakei Juzo committed suicide in an exemplary fashion. He refused the offer of having an assistant decapitate him in order to shorten his sufferings. He made cuts in his abdomen in the shape of a cross with his short sword. His blood and entrails burst out, staining his clothing and the tatamis. He emitted not a single cry, and only a slight grimace was visible on his face during the agonies, which seemed to the witnesses to last an eternity. Finally, he fell on his face on the ground. The body was thrown in a common burial pit at the bottom of the castle's dry moat.

In the middle of the night, a shadow flitted out of the moat. Kakei

Juzo, buried alive, had freed himself from the loose earth of the burial pit and scaled one of the moat walls without drawing the attention of the sentries. He had used the secret techniques of *nin-jutsu*, the art of spies. He had hidden a pouch filled with blood and animal guts in his hakama and had used a trick sword. Applying the talents of illusionist and hypnotist that ninja were known to possess, he had succeeded in pulling off this grand deception. We need not dwell on the other psychic powers of the ninja—altered states of consciousness, prolonged arrest of the heartbeat and the breath, and so on—the result of the mantras and mudras they took from the yamabushi, the mountain ascetics. In particular what Tokugawa Ieyasu had been unaware of in this case was that he had hired an assassin who was one of Juzo's brothers in arms. The hired killer and and his victim had conspired together to find an honorable solution that would allow both of them to squeak successfully out of this very tight spot. Afterward, Kakei Juzo was officially dead and could act in the shadows with impunity.

These two ninja were among the very rare individuals ever to pull the wool over the eyes of Tokugawa Ieyasu, who over the years earned the nickname of "the old fox."

22 The Archery Contest

With the introduction of firearms, the art of bow shooting was in danger of disappearing. However, this art was one of the principal disciplines of bushido, the Way of the Samurai. As a means of keeping this tradition alive, the annual Toshiya archery contest was instituted. The site of the contest was a temple in Kyoto known as Sanjusangen-do, famous for its thousand buddha statues.

The shooting took place in a covered galley about sixty meters long. The difficulty for the archer lay in keeping the shot tightly arced enough to avoid the thirty-three cross beams that supported the roof joists and still allow for a shot long enough to reach the target at the end of the gallery. The bow had to be a strong one, but not so strong as to exhaust the archer; for the winner was the one who was able to shoot the greatest number of arrows into the distant target. The contest lasted twenty-four hours, from sunrise until the following dawn. It was a true ordeal, an ascetic exercise comparable to the austerities practiced by Buddhist monks, such as ten thousand prostrations.

Going beyond one's normal level of output as was required here was more than a matter of technique and endurance. It was only possible through the force of mind that allowed the archer to enter into an altered state where another level of energy could come into play.

The best archers of Japan, and through them the schools of kyu-jutsu they represented, were matched against each other in this contest. In 1679, Hoshino Kanzaemon achieved the feat of hitting the target with eight thousand of the 10,542 arrows he shot. Seventeen years later his feat was still unrivaled and he remained "the First under Heaven."

In 1696, a young archer named Wasa Daihachiro presented himself at the contest. He had trained assiduously for years in order to meet this challenge. He shot without stopping for many hours and then, already having planted five thousand arrows in the target, he allowed himself a short pause. When he tried to resume shooting, he no longer able to

bend his bow. His shoulders and back were so swollen that the pain was intolerable. At this point, one of the members of the jury who was seated on the tribunal rose to his feet and approached the unhappy competitor. He reproached him for having stopped shooting and drew his short sword from its sheath. He made cuts in the swollen flesh, the blood flowed, and the archer was once again able to bend his bow. He finally succeeded in shooting more than thirteen thousand arrows, of which 8,133 hit the target. He became the new “First under Heaven” and has not been bested since.

Wasa Daihachiro, after having achieved this feat, walked over to the tribunal in order to pay his obeisance to the judge who had helped him.

“I am very grateful to you,” he said, “for having made it possible for me to surpass the record of the great Hoshino Kanzaemon. Would you be so kind as to tell me your name?”

The master archer on the tribunal replied with a warm smile.

“You know it already, since you have just said it.”

By enabling his rival’s victory through his noble gesture, Hoshino Kanzaemon became a part of bushido legend. On the Way of the Samurai, there is no greater achievement than conquering oneself.

23 The Shogun and the Assassin

Kuruma Zenshichiro was the son of Tanbanokami, who was killed at the battle of Sekigahara with many other soldiers of the defeated army. Taking the view that Tokugawa Ieyasu, the winner of the battle who was now shogun, was a usurper and, on top of this, the man responsible for the death of his father, Kuruma decided to assassinate him. Thanks to some connections he had, he was able to get himself hired incognito as a gardener at Edo Castle.

One day, as the shogun was passing close to him, he threw his shears right at Ieyasu's head. The shogun just barely managed to dodge the blow. Immediately his bodyguards leapt on the gardener and were just about to execute him.

"Stop!" said the shogun. "Let him go. It was without doubt an accident. His tool slipped out of his hands, and that's all there was to it. If we punish an innocent man, we will lose the affection of the people. And anyway, as you can see, even though I don't have much time to train anymore, I still have pretty good reflexes."

An amused smile lit up the shogun's face. Seeing that all was not lost, Zenshichiro prostrated at his feet and babbled out a stream of apologies. Ieyasu continued his walk. The matter was closed.

In spite of the kindness the shogun had shown him, Zenshichiro did not give up his deadly plan. He simply lay in wait for another opportunity. Since he had been coming to the castle for a while already, he had had time learn the shogun's habits. One night he decided to hide in the garden behind a rock near the latrines and wait for the lord of the castle to come out and see to his needs. This time he was armed with his sword and he intended to behead his enemy without hesitation. At the hour of the boar, when Ieyasu came out into the garden escorted by his bodyguards with their lanterns in their hands, he said, "How strange. The crickets are very still. Perhaps there is a ninja hidden here somewhere. Have a look!"

The samurai started to search the area. Zenshichiro decided to put his life on the line. He leapt from his hiding place, sword in hand, and rushed the shogun. A bodyguard came between them and blocked the blow. The ill-fated youth did not give up easily. He fought hard and well but was finally overwhelmed by the force of numbers. Though wounded, he was still fighting with the ferocity of a tiger when the shogun shouted, “I want him alive!”

Disarmed, the assassin was dragged before the shogun, who asked him who he was. As all was lost, Zenshichiro admitted the truth and begged to be dispatched without delay.

The shogun replied, “Destiny has made you my enemy, but your intentions are honorable. You are doing no more than carrying out your filial duty. That is a sacred obligation, the very foundation of bushido. I admire your devotion, and I intend to spare your life. And now that you have been found out, I am asking you to drop your plan. Since for you without doubt it is unthinkable to enter my service, return to your lord, Satake Yoshinori.”

“It is impossible for me to continue living under the same sky as the man responsible for the death of my father. If you pardon me, I will commit seppuku!”

In a tone of irritation, Tokugawa Ieyasu replied, “I forbid you to commit seppuku! If you disobey, I will have all the members of your family killed!”

Numb with shock, his head in his hands to hide his tears, Zenshichiro murmured, “I have no choice but to obey you. How could I let myself be the cause of the death of my mother? But because I failed to avenge the death of my father, I am no longer worthy to live among samurai. I could no longer look my peers in the eye. Allow me to go live as a beggar.”

Moved by such filial piety and by so high a sense of honor, Ieyasu accepted this. But to prevent this exemplary samurai from falling too deep into a life of misery unworthy of him, he named Zenshichiro the head of the brotherhood of beggars. In this way, out of compassion, Shogun Tokugawa made it possible for this family to survive and perpetuate the worship of its ancestors.

Ieyasu, the old fox, was a cunning and patient man with a keen sense of politics, but he often showed generosity as well. Through the nobility of his spirit, he was able to lay the foundations for what became known as the Edo period, two and a half centuries during which his shogunal dynasty reigned over a country at peace.

> If the lord is not filled with compassion toward his people, even if he does not govern badly, revolts will occur. But if the lord

cultivates benevolence, he will have no enemies on this earth.
—Tokugawa Ieyasu

24 The Song of the Nightingale

Ah, the nightingale!
There were many people there
But not one of them heard it.

—Ryokan

The Yagyu were the masters of arms of the Tokugawa shoguns for several generations.

One gorgeous afternoon in springtime, when he was practicing with the sword, Yagyu Tajima no Kami said to one of his sons:

"One thing is sure: you're not good for anything today. Are you distracted or what?"

"No, Father. Just the opposite. I'm all concentration. My mind is completely concentrated on my sword. I am not letting any extraneous thoughts distract me."

"While we were sparring, did you hear the song of the nightingale?"

"No."

"That's just what I thought. You still haven't understood what real concentration is."

"What are you talking about!?"

"If the mind is aimed in just one direction, it becomes its own obstacle and is unable to respond to all situations. That is what was so well expressed in the poem of our great Zen master, Takuan Soho:

If you look at one leaf
You only see that.
If you don't look at any of them
The whole tree appears.

25 | Master Banzo's Bamboo Stick

Take your mind off your sword and off your hands. Don't forget that your legs are accompanied by your hips. And don't forget that with only your arms, you're no more than an old windmill turning its white wings at the whim of the wind. Once your blade, your hands, and your entire body are one single atom vibrating in space, then go ahead and confront that warrior standing in the middle of the path, too calmly expecting to win a decisive victory. Suddenly, he will feel the ice of your sword penetrating him and splitting asunder his solemn vision of glory.

—Jacques Normand, based on the oral tradition of Ken

Yagyu Matajuro studied the art of the sword from his earliest childhood with his father Tajima no Kami, who was the master of arms and a close adviser to the shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu. The young man showed himself to be less diligent at practicing the sword than at visiting the flowers of the floating world. His reputation was that of a dandy whose beauty, elegance, and charm melted the hearts of women.

One day his father summoned him and told him, "I can't accept a dilettante like you as a member of my school. You are a stain on the reputation of our lineage, which has served three generations of shoguns in the Way of the Sword. As of this very moment, I am kicking you out of the dojo, and my advice is that you study another art, one in which you might be able to shine."

The voices of slander insinuate that there was also another reason for this disgrace. According to them, Matajuro had gotten a little too close to a sublime young courtesan who was his father's mistress.

In any case, Matajuro was furious at this turn of events and very far from being willing to give up the art of the sword. He decided to go on his *musha shugyo*, his martial-arts pilgrimage. He left Edo as a ronin. He went and studied at various schools, without making much progress. He was in a hurry to prove to his father what he was capable of and to

reclaim his place within the famous Yagyu clan.

In the course of his wanderings, he began to hear about a certain Master Banzo. This master had an excellent reputation and was said to make use of very special teaching methods. The word was that he lived secluded from the world at the foot of Mount Futara, teaching a few disciples chosen with great care.

After some time Matajuro managed to find the place where Banzo carried on his teaching, an annex of the ancient sanctuary of Nikko. He knocked on the gate. A disciple came and opened it a crack and asked him what his business was. Matajuro gave his name and expressed his ardent desire to be admitted into the master's school of the sword. He was asked if he had a letter of recommendation. He admitted he did not have one. The gate was closed. It opened again an hour later, and the young ronin was told, "Back on the road with you. The master is not taking any more disciples."

And the gate was slammed in his face.

Matajuro was familiar with the rules of the game in these schools. This was probably a standard way of testing his determination. So he sat down in front of the gate. At nightfall, he curled up against it, underneath the little roof it had over it. The following morning, he was still there.

The gate was opened a few times. Disciples came and went. As they passed by, they treated him to a few barbs: "No use hanging out here. You're wasting your time. The master clearly told us he wanted nothing to do with a pariah from the Yagyu clan. Your reputation preceded you, even as far as these remote mountains."

And so on.

For three days, this scion of noble family put up with these comments and endured hunger and the cold of night without getting discouraged. On the fourth day the gate opened a crack and a voice said, "The master wants to see you."

Matajuro was received in the dojo. He prostrated before a graying man with a penetrating glance and a voice that rumbled like thunder in a storm.

"You certainly know how to annoy people! It's three days now you've been at the gate laying siege to my school. What, are you deaf? Since you don't believe what my pupils have been telling you, you can now hear it directly from me. There is no way that you, the black sheep of an illustrious family, can be allowed to tarnish the reputation of my school!"

"Master, please be kind enough to excuse my boldness. Permit me to insist. I realize my mistakes. I am ready to do anything to make progress on the Way of the Sword. I'll practice and practice. Every person has the

right to a second chance."

"You are truly prepared to make all the sacrifices?"

"I will do anything you ask.

An amused twinkle lit the eye of the formidable Banzo. He sat there stroking his beard. Finally, in softer tones, he added, "Under those circumstances, I might reconsider your case. Maybe I should give you a try."

"Thank you so very much, master. I will not disappoint you. I'll work hard. By the way, tell me, how long do you think it will be before I reach a level that will impress my father?"

"I have no idea. I don't know yet what kind of talent you have, if any." Then pointing to one of his disciples, he said, "Take some bokkens and have a go!"

The wooden swords whistled in the air, and after a few moves, Matajuro was obviously in trouble. His adversary parried an attack of his and in the same movement delivered a fatal blow that stopped just an inch from his skull.

"Stop!" the master ordered. "I've seen enough to understand your father's despair. Amazing that you have trained since childhood in the prestigious Yagyu Shinkage school and you still fight on the level of the worst of my pupils! Goodness me, it will take at least ten years for you to get to where you're even presentable!"

Totally distraught, tears in his eyes, Matajuro murmured, "That long? But I so much want to prove to my father what I'm capable of. Even if I'm willing to undergo very intensive training, it still couldn't be any sooner?"

"If that's the way it is, add another thirty years."

"Even if I keep polishing my techniques by practicing all the time, if I work without a break morning till night?" Quite amused, the unpredictable Banzo replied, "Well in that case, we'll have to think in terms of seventy years."

Manjuro rebelled. "But master, I beg you, don't toy with me. First ten years, now seventy. Please try to understand. I want to get back in my father's good graces in the very near future, before it's too late. He isn't that young anymore."

His eyes ablaze and his voice gruff with irritation, Banzo cut the young man off.

"'Master' you called me? Coming from you, that word is a bit much. Somebody as much in a hurry to get results as you are is not going to get very far very fast!"

These words hit Matajuro like a shot. He closed his eyes. Understanding at last that his impatience was a problem, he lay down his weapons, and said, "Master, please forgive me. I humbly request that

you take me on as a disciple no matter what the conditions."

"All right, then. There's a chance we can make something of you yet. So here are my conditions. You are on hire here as a servant. You hand your swords over to me and you don't set foot in the dojo until further notice."

From morning till night, Matajuro had to do all the dirty jobs that fall to a servant: housework, cooking, washing the dishes, gardening, and so on. From time to time, he got a brief look at the lessons going on in the dojo, and secretly at night, he practiced the moves he had glimpsed. That way, he was able to convince himself he was not completely wasting his time.

Things went like this for about a year. Matajuro had begun to feel the trial phase was going on too long. Months and months had been wasted without his really being able to train, without his being able to work with a partner. He had the definite sense that he had fallen into a trap. He was seriously considering getting back on the road.

One day as he was raking one of the rows in the garden, chewing over his dark thoughts, *bang!* He was struck a heavy blow in the back. Furious, he spun around to find Master Banzo standing there with a smile on his face, holding his bamboo stick.

"So, dreaming are we?" said the master. "Don't forget that you are in a school of swordsmanship here. A samurai must never allow himself to be taken by surprise. Any implement can be a weapon."

And leaving him crushed and confused, the sensei walked away. From that day on, Matajuro's life became a living hell. Blows rained down on him. His back and ribs were covered with bruises. At night, he had to sleep on his stomach.

As the master's scapegoat, he was compelled to be constantly on his guard. While continuing to take care of his tasks, he was constantly on the alert. He kept an eye peeled on his surroundings, and he heard the least little noise. This slowed his work down. His jobs were neglected and his fellow disciples scolded him constantly. And always at the moment when he least expected it, the instant his attention lapsed, he was on the receiving end of a masterly blow from the bamboo stick.

One day when he was sweeping the porch, he heard a slight rubbing noise behind him. He turned around just in time to parry the bamboo stick with his broom.

"So," said the master, "my methods are finally showing some results."

Free your mind from all that binds it,
Till it is pure like a lake of jade.
Like a mirror, it will catch the dark thoughts
That stain the enemy's mind.

See them outlined clearly like the shadow
Of a pine projected by the moon on the shoji.
Unmoving and powerful like Mount Fuji
Watch peacefully; imitate a cat sleeping
and be ready to leap like a coiled spring!

—Jacques Normand, based on the oral tradition of Ken

The more months went by, the less Matajuro allowed himself to be taken by surprise. He attained a state of perception that let him sense a presence behind a wall or the slightest intention that had him as its object. His body would be busy working, but his awareness remained constantly on the alert. The master and the other disciples attempted to attack him at all hours of the day and night, giving him no respite. In the end he could spot all these attempts and would spontaneously parry them.

At that point, the master gave him his swords back and told him, "You have discovered the state of *heijoshin*, the unflappable mind of every moment. Your trial period is over. You can join us in the dojo."

And less than ten years after his arrival, Matajuro received from Master Banzo the menkyo kaiden, the certificate of the ultimate transmission of the secrets of his school.

Practicing Zen in the midst of daily activity is a million times superior to seeking it through immobility. Those who only meditate in calm circumstances are unable to maintain their inner freedom when they enter into movement. As soon as they begin participating in ordinary worldly life, their fragile state of wakefulness disappears without a trace.

—Hakuin

Back once more in Edo, Matajuro asked his father to receive him, but Yagyu Tajima no Kami Munenori refused. The prodigal son took up residence in the city, hoping he would somehow find a way to come in contact with him. Hardly was Matajuro back in the capital when an incident occurred that put his name on everyone's lips. He was provoked in the marketplace by a ronin who had the reputation of a pugnacious and rugged fighter who was more or less unbeatable. Matajuro refused to draw his sword. The bravo, who had recognized him, called him a coward and proclaimed that he was the disgrace of the Yagyu clan. Because he did not want to be shut out of his father's house forever, the outcast was forced to accept a duel. He bought two little straw hats, and he used them in the fight, one in each hand, like two shields. He dodged all his adversary's attacks, succeeded in disarming him, and sent him

sprawling in the dust by administering well-aimed blows with the points of his straw hats. He won without drawing his sword.

When Matajuro requested Tokugawa Iemitsu to intervene with his father on his behalf, the shogun, who had gotten wind of Matajuro's exploit in the marketplace, was amused by the idea and accepted. He summoned Tajima no Kami and said, "Master Yagyu, the son you banished from your school seems to have improved considerably in the art of the sword. No doubt you have heard of his fight using two hats. It would please me a great deal if you would consent to test him again. I was thinking that perhaps you might provide us with the diverting spectacle of a friendly match between the two of you. What do you think?"

It was unthinkable for Tajima no Kami to go against the shogun's will. Thus the match was organized for the following day in the gardens of Edo Castle. Before a group of courtiers, father and son found themselves face to face, bokkens in their hands. They carefully took the en garde position and looked each other over for a long moment without moving. Then they began making slow moves. One advanced while the other backed away, and then the action was reversed. They were like two wild animals measuring each other before leaping. Their breathing seemed to be synchronized. Next a few feints were made to try to discover weaknesses in the other's defense or simply to gauge the other's style of movement. The father was in a hurry to put an end to this comedy that he had to perform in public against his will. He launched into an impressive attack made up of a series of strikes that would have been unstoppable for most samurai. Did he not enjoy the reputation of being the finest blade under the heaven of the Rising Sun? The son dodged and parried, seeming almost to play with the older man. The father opted for a different tactic. He attacked in a rush, suddenly changed his rhythm, slowed down, then lowered his guard and uncovered himself to lure his son into venturing into a space where the older samurai could catch him. As though he were able to guess every one of his father's intentions, Matajuro avoided all his traps. Then it was his turn to go on the offensive, to lead the dance. Yagyu Munenori parried and counterattacked with the vigor of a tiger. *Clack-clack*, the colliding wooden swords moved faster and faster. The adversaries seemed equally matched. The match dragged on. The audience could hardly believe their eyes. No one yet had been able to hold up this long against the shogun's master of arms!

But the son had the advantage of youth. He realized that his father was tiring and would not be able to go the distance if this continued. In order not to cause him to lose face, he intentionally committed an error. The error was immediately punished by the paternal bokken, which

stopped dead two inches from his carotid artery.

The great Tajima no Kami had clearly won. His honor was saved. But the experts in swordsmanship who made up part of the shogun's party were not fooled.

Tokugawa Iemitsu solemnly proclaimed: "Master Yagyu, in keeping with your reputation, you have defeated your offspring, but you have to admit that he really made you work for it! Has he not proved that he has made significant progress? Does he not seem to you worthy to reclaim his position in your school?"

"Indeed, you are right, Your Excellency," the perspiring master of arms had to admit.

And so it was that Matajuro regained his rank and the affection of his father. In his heart, Tajima no Kami was proud that his son, in whose veins the blood of the Yagyu ran, had attained such a level.

The legend of Yagyu Matajuro had only just begun. The tale is told that one day, to discourage a ronin who wanted to confront him in a duel, Matajuro struck down a bird in the sky through the mere force of a cry in which he had projected his inner energy. And with another cry, the story tells us, he brought the animal back to life.

26 | Judge Ooka and the Statue of Jizo

The samurai Ooka Tadasuke was appointed by Shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune to the post of *minami machi bugio* of Edo. In this post, he was not only the supreme judge but also the chief of police for the whole southern half of the city.

Ooka turned out to be an excellent investigator and a magistrate of integrity whose acute sense of justice and original methods became legendary.

One day a manufacturer of kimonos came to him with a complaint concerning the theft of a cart of his that had been fully loaded with rolls of silk. The cart had been taken as he was taking a siesta in front of the Narihiri-san Tosen-ji, a Buddhist temple in the Katsushika quarter. Since the scene of the crime was within his jurisdiction, Judge Ooka led the investigation. He went to the site, examined the area around it, and tried to find witnesses. No one had seen anything, and there were no leads. After a time, the magistrate gave some orders to the samurai of his escort, who returned not long after with some rope. At the entry to the temple on a dais was a statue of the Jizo Bosatsu, the bodhisattva Kshitigarbha. Ooka Tadasuke commanded that the statue be tied up with rope. Then he began speaking in front of the crowd that had assembled to find out what the eccentric judge was up to this time.

“Statue of Jizo, I arrest you in the name of the law. You will be dragged before the bench to be interrogated in this case of theft. You are suspected of negligence in your role as protector of this place, or worse yet, of being an accomplice to the crime, since you have not revealed the name of the guilty party.”

The crowd went wild, roaring with laughter. Derisive comments rang out.

“The judge has lost his mind! He has no idea what he’s doing! He’s been playing the oddball so long, he’s gone completely nuts!”

Visibly furious, Ooka Tadasuke turned to face the crowd. Having

quieted them down, he made a declaration.

“For having insulted a magistrate, I’m sentencing all the inhabitants of this quarter to a fine. Starting tomorrow, every one of you has to bring a roll of silk to the court.”

So the next day, there was a long line out the door of the court building. One by one, the citizens of the Katsushika quarter entered and deposited the roll of silk that they had been fined. A clerk painstakingly ticked off each name on his register, and the owner of the stolen cart carefully examined each roll of silk. He recognized several that came from his pilfered stock. The suspects were interrogated and they confessed who they had bought the silk from. In this way the thief was identified.

The proof that this edifying tale is factual is that the Jizo statue at the Nariharasan Tosen temple is still tied up to this day. The inhabitants of the quarter still tie a bit of cord to it in the hope of recovering a stolen object. This must really work, because every year the Jizo statue has to be liberated from its bonds to keep it from disappearing entirely under a mountain of string!

27 | Asari's Shadow

At the turning of the road is a black and terrible shadow.
The enemy appears and challenges you with his glance.
If you let the slightest concern enter you,
You'll have no choice but to flee or die.
Do not forget where your greatest enemy is hidden:
A hero has always had to vanquish his weakness.
If you leave your self behind, the shiver vanishes
And the image becomes no more than the shadow of a shadow
Which melts away in the morning like a bad dream.

—Jacques Normand, based on the oral tradition of Ken

YAMAOKA TESSHU was born in 1836 to a family of samurai. His father was a high-level functionary in the shogunal administration. At the age of nine, he began the practice of the sword according to the Shinkage school. From that time on, he kept up his daily training. Along with his work in the martial arts, he studied the Confucian classics and later, on his father's advice, he was initiated into the practice of Zen.

He was nearly six feet tall, a very unusual height for this period in Japan. In his contemporaries' eyes, he was a colossus. His extraordinary physical capacities, his technique polished by continual vigorous practice, and his passion and flare made him a formidable champion. He was capable of fighting one opponent after the other without a break, taking blows without flinching, and of injuring his opponents in spite of their armor and padding. He participated in all the competitions and challenged the outstanding adepts of all the schools in the capital. But few of them were able to compete with him. Some of the schools were no longer willing to open the doors of their dojos to him. It was not long before he became known as Tesshu the Demon, or simply as the Madman.

At the age of seventeen, he entered the prestigious military institute of Kobukan. At twenty he was appointed an instructor of swordsmanship.

A dozen years later, the shogun made him chief of his personal guard, thus assuring his position as the leading figure of the samurai elite. This did not cause him to slack off in the least. He continued to train with great intensity and to confront any outstanding adept of the sword who made his appearance in Edo. He never stopped pushing the limits of his art. One day he heard of a master who had taken up residence in the capital. The newcomer had a formidable reputation—he was said to be unbeatable.

When Yamaoka Tesshu pushed open the door of Master Asari Gimei's dojo, he found himself face to face with a small man twenty years his elder. A match was in order. After the customary bows, the two men felt each other out for a few moments. Then, as was his wont, the Madman, the Demon of the Sword, threw himself ferociously into the fight and unleashed a series of attacks with his *shinai*, his bamboo training sword. Not one of his blows struck home. They were all parried or eluded by the frail-looking master of fifty, who seemed to be toying with this giant in his prime. It was like the fight of the buffalo and the leopard. But when Asari suddenly went on the attack, an incredible thing happened. Despite his technique, his strength, and his size, Tesshu, in parrying Asari's attacks was irresistibly pushed back. He had to keep backing up and soon found himself right up against the wall of the dojo. Then he was forced to back right out the door. Once out in the garden, he kept having to give ground and was finally pushed right back into the street. At that point, Asari slammed the gate in his face and did an about-face.

"Keep going!" the outraged Tesshu yelled at him. "You haven't won yet."

"Are you so sure?" the sensei replied, signaling to him to have a look at his chest protector.

When the impenitent swordsman examined the shell of his chest protector, he saw three freshly made gashes. In the heat of combat, he had not felt these blows, but if they had been delivered with a real katana, they would have been mortal.

The Demon of the Sword had finally found his master. He became the disciple of Asari Sensei. Every time Tesshu faced off with him, he seemed to lose all his abilities. Without fail, he was always pushed out of the dojo. He had done his best to assimilate all the techniques taught by the master, had diligently practiced the katas of his school, and for years had followed all his advice, but still he could not compete with him. The master's kiai, the power of his concentration and the energy that emanated from him, always dominated him. Tesshu, who was an established practitioner of Zen, realized that the mind of the sensei was superior to his own. Therefore he intensified his practice of meditation. But even here he was troubled by the image of the Asari, who was

literally haunting him. Tesshu's mind was darkened and thwarted by his gigantic shadow. He was face to face with an unclimbable mountain.

The Zen master Ganno advised Yamaoka Tesshu to meditate on a koan:

> At the origin
> Not a single thing

After years of meditation on the meaning of these enigmatic words, the samurai had the impression that he had finally realized their true significance. To verify his understanding, he went to Dokuon, the abbot of the Shokoku monastery. In the course of their *mondo*, their spiritual exchange, Tesshu said, "The mind, the Buddha, sentient beings—they do not exist. The true nature of all things is primordial emptiness."

The Zen master, who was smoking his long pipe, smiled very slightly, as though with approval. The samurai bowed by way of thanks, convinced that Dokuon had just confirmed his "illumination." At that moment, the old monk, with the agility of a cat, struck him a blow on the skull with his pipe. Tesshu, furious, leapt to his feet, grimacing and stifling a curse.

The Zen master burst out laughing and said, "That primordial emptiness seems quick to anger!"

Disillusioned, Yamaoka Tesshu resumed his reflections on the koan in the hope of getting to the essence of it. More years passed without his being able to unseal its truth by means of a satori, an awakening to ultimate reality. And the shadow of Asari continued to trouble him. Each match with him was a further debacle, as though the mind of the master was growing greater and greater with the years.

At the end of ten years, the samurai asked for advice from Tekisui, the abbot of Tenryu-ji. The Zen master gave him another koan, which seemed to him more suited to Tesshu's case.

> When two sparkling swords cross
> There is nowhere to escape.
> Advance calmly
> Like a lotus flower opening
> In the midst of flames
> And run the heavens through!

Seventeen years after his first encounter with the invincible Asari, Yamaoka Tesshu continued to train and meditate without respite, driven by the desire to get beyond the mirror that was his master. One morning in his forty-fifth year, he had a revelation concerning the koan of the two swords. Finally, he experienced satori. It was like an inner

earthquake. His mental walls crumbled, letting in the light of a brilliant jewel in which the horrifying spectre of Asari melted away.

Wanting to make sure of his realization, he headed for the dojo. The master and disciple soon stood facing each other in the en garde position. Suddenly, the master lowered his sword and said, “You have arrived at last!”

A few days later, the master officially recognized Yamaoka Tesshu as his successor as the head of his school. And he himself never touched a sword again.

Shortly thereafter, Yamaoka Tesshu created his own style of swordsmanship, which he named *itto muto ryu*, the School of the Sword of No Sword.

> Outside the mind, there is no sword. This is the no-sword. No-sword means no-mind. No-mind means a mind that dwells nowhere. If the mind stops, the enemy appears. If the mind remains fluid, no enemy exists.
>
> —Yamaoka Tesshu

28 The Samurai and the Young Emperor

At the time of the Meiji Restoration, the sword master Yamaoka Tesshu, even though he had formerly been one of the commanders of the shogun's personal guard, was recommended by the ministers and generals of the new regime, the famous Saigo Takamuri at their head, to be assigned to the imperial household. Tesshu was considered to be an accomplished samurai, an advanced Zen practitioner, and was known for his nobility of character. Thus he was chosen to be one of the tutors of the young and impetuous Meiji emperor in the hope that he would have a positive influence on the youth.

The ebullient young ruler was physically robust and had an immoderate passion for sumo. One of his preferred pastimes was to challenge his aides-de-camp to wrestling matches. Of course, they always let the emperor win, so he began to think he was unbeatable.

In the course of an evening of much drinking, Meiji brought up a favorite project of his and asked Yamaoka Tesshu for his opinion about it. When Tesshu let it be known he was against it, the emperor got upset and challenged him to a wrestling match. The sword master politely refused, but the young ruler insisted on making him fight. He grabbed hold of him to try to force him to his feet. He pushed and pulled with to no effect. The samurai was as immovable as a giant bronze statue of Buddha. Meiji got into such a rage that he threw a punch at his tutor. At the last moment, the sword master ducked and His Majesty, carried by the force of his blow, flew through the air and ended up unconscious on the tatamis.

While some of the courtiers ran to succor the emperor, others began reproaching the tutor for his lack of respect toward his sovereign. Tesshu, without replying, got to his feet and went to sit in a neighboring room. A number of his fellow officers followed him there and told him in no uncertain terms that he must go and apologize to the emperor.

"That is out of the question. I did not so much as raise a hand to the

emperor. He himself caused himself to fall. I am a samurai who is devoted heart and soul to His Majesty, I am not a mere lackey. In my view I did my duty. The young emperor needed a lesson. If nobody ever resists him, if everyone simply goes along with his least whims, he will become a real tyrant. It is high time he learned that he is not invincible and that he has to maintain his self-control even if he has been drinking. I request you to communicate my remarks to His Majesty when he regains consciousness. If he feels he has been insulted, I will commit seppuku at once."

A courtier returned with the following message: "His Majesty hereby informs you that he has decided to give up wrestling and sake."

Yamaoka Tesshu was later appointed imperial chamberlain and became one of the emperor's closest advisors. He remained in the emperor's service for another ten years. Then he retired from the imperial administration to devote the short time he still had left to live to the art of the sword, to Zen, to calligraphy, and to charity.

Yamaoka always wore the same threadbare clothes. One day the emperor said to him, "It is not fitting for one of the members of my retinue to be so ill attired. Take this money and go buy yourself some new clothes."

Three days later, the chamberlain was still wearing the same worn-out clothes.

"What did you do with my money?" the ruler asked him.

"I used it to clothe some of Your Majesty's poor children."

The emperor sighed and smiled. He concluded that his chamberlain was completely incorrigible. His reputation was that of a bodhisattva who never kept anything for himself. Not only did he distribute his salary to the needy people who knocked on his door, but he also executed calligraphies that he sold to give money to charitable causes and for the reconstruction of temples. It is said that he executed a million such calligraphies, and it may be supposed that he spent part of his nights doing them, because he produced them while continuing with his official duties as well as his practice of swordsmanship and Zen!

> We must take care of others and not be concerned with our own welfare. Doing away with our egoistic desires, courageously facing all adversity, and keeping a pure heart—that is bushido.
>
> —Yamaoka Tesshu

GLOSSARY

Bokken: Wooden sword used for training.
Budo: Spiritual way or martial art.
Bushido: Literally, "Way of the Warriors." Code of honor or ethics of the samurai.
Daimyo: Literally, "great name." Title given to lords of important fiefs and lords with a large number of vassals.
Edo: Former name of Tokyo. Tokugawa Ieyasu made it his shogunal capital at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Edo period refers to the Tokugawa period of shogunal reign, which lasted from 1603 to 1868 when the power of the emperor (Meiji) was restored.
Katana: Sword.
Ki (Chinese: *qi*): Energy.
Kiai: Concentration or unification of the ki.
Koan: Enigmatic or paradoxical Zen saying on which the practitioner meditates in order to achieve liberation from mental activity.
Kozuka: Small knife carried by samurai on the scabbards of their swords.
Kyu-jutsu: The art of archery.
Mantra: A Sanskrit word meaning "protection of the mind." An incantation or support for meditation. A prayer that serves to invoke a deity or a buddha and makes it possible to manifest his or her power.
Mudra: A Sanskrit word meaning "gesture," "sign," or "seal." Usually used to designate a symbolic gesture to which magical power may sometimes be attributed.
Ninja: Spy, hired killer. A mercenary warrior who does not belong to the samurai class, is not subject to the code of bushido, and who may make use of unconventional methods.
Ronin: A dispossessed samurai, a vagabond warrior who no longer has a liege-lord or revenue. Some ronin adapted to their loss of station by taking up trades reserved for the lower merchant or artisan classes. Others became monks or wandering knights who sought to acquire a sufficient reputation in the martial arts to enter the service of a lord as a master of arms or a bodyguard. Still others ended up as mercenaries,

hired muscle, or worse, bandits.

SAMURAI: Literally, "he who serves." Originally, samurai were guards in the service of the aristocracy. They developed into a warrior class of *bushi*, or noble attendants, which became divided into powerful clans that competed for political sway. A samurai was attached to a lord or daimyo, to whom he swore absolute obedience and loyalty; in exchange he received a fief or revenues. Only samurai had the right to wear two swords, and this became their distinctive mark.

SATORI: Spiritual awakening, realization, or illumination.

SEPPUKU: Ritual suicide by belly cutting, reserved for samurai.

SHIN: Mind, heart, essence. (Also called *kokoro*.)

SHINTO: Ancient animistic religion of Japan, shamanic in origin. It has its own mythology, rites, and temples where the kamis, the gods, are venerated and their protection invoked.

SHOGUN: "Supreme general." The shogun held the real political power in Japan even while it remained officially in the name of the emperor. From the twelfth century until the Meiji Restoration (1868), the emperor had only ceremonial power. The shogun was always a member of the Minamoto clan, which was imperial in origin. This was the reason that Hideyoshi, who was not a Minamoto, never held this title. The function gradually became hereditary with the result that shogunal dynasties developed. The last dynasty was that of the Tokugawa, which lasted from 1603 to 1868, corresponding to the Edo period.

SHOJI: A sliding window-door consisting of translucent paper mounted on a wooden frame.

SHUGENDO: The spiritual way of the Yamabushi hermits. Shugendo is a syncretistic practice, drawn from Shinto, esoteric Buddhism (Tendai and Shingon), and Taoism. Its adherents live in the mountains and practice austerities. It is believed that they develop magical-religious powers, and they are often considered to be psychics and healers, or some would say, shamans.

YAMABUSHI: Literally, "he who sleeps on the mountain." An ascetic who practices shugendo.

ZAZEN: Sitting meditation in lotus position, the essential practice of Zen.

ZEN: The Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word *chan*, which itself is derived from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, meaning "meditation." Zen is a Buddhist teaching, which according to tradition was founded in China in the sixth century by Bodhidharma (Japanese: Daruma), an Indian monk. Strongly influenced by Taoism, Zen was introduced into Japan at the end of the twelfth century by Eisai. Eisai was highly esteemed by the samurai and shoguns; thus he had a significant influence on the martial arts, the tea ceremony, ikebana, the art of

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SOURCES AND CREDITS

THE ART OF THE STORYTELLER consists in fashioning his own version of traditional stories following his personal inspiration and style. He does this by continuously polishing them through a living relationship with his audience and by continuously looking for ways to make the deep meaning of them resonate clearly. Several of the tales and legends in this book were transmitted to me orally; however, I have in addition consulted written versions of them. Historical research has been a mainstay of my work. It has made it possible for me to connect the stories here with the many persons they refer to who really existed and who often, in keeping with the customs of ancient Japan, changed their names a number of times in the course of their lives.

The poems cited are translations by the present author. Those by Jacques Normand are original compositions inspired by the traditions of ancient schools into which he has been initiated and are based on long years of practice.

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